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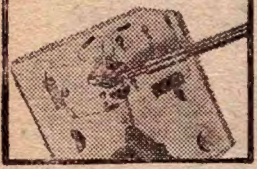

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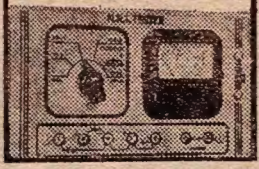

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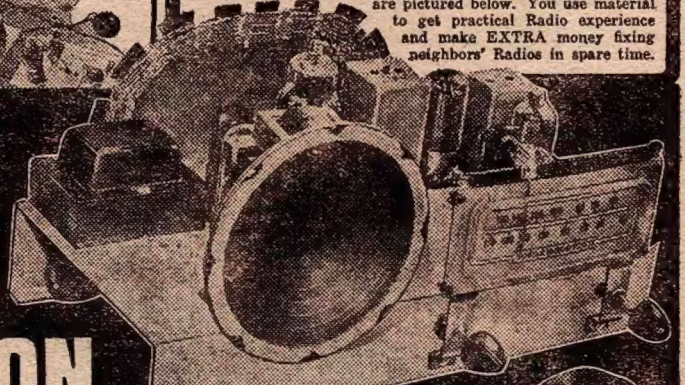

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10 BEST WESTERN ROMANCES

Vol. 1 No. 1

RANCH LOVE STORIES

MAR. 1950 ISSUE

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THE NEXT ISSUE OF RANCH LOVE STORIES ON SALE FEBRUARY 25th, 1950

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Trail To Love

The Editors welcome you to our big, first romance roundup!

HAVE you ever shoved a bronc across a mountain stream, glanced back in the saddle toward the lanky cowboy riding with you, a soft whistle puckering his lips? Did you watch your tophand take first prize at the rodeo; throw and brand a calf? And the terror of that midnight raid—not knowing whether your man would come back. Have you wanted to be part of that great and wonderful experience that was love on the lonely prairie, when it meant siding your man through all the happiness and also through all the dangers? That, was the old west. . . .

The purple glow cast by the setting sun lights up the range. Then the violet shadows ripen into dusk and night falls swiftly. The day's chores are done and cares slip from tired shoulders. Somewhere, a cowboy riding herd, lifts his voice in a lonely song. Around a campfire, wagon-weary travelers stomp and swirl to the sound of a reedy fiddle. From the bulking shadows comes a muted laugh as a young cowpuncher courts his lady.

Out of the west comes the whisper of romance. A storybook of laughter, love and adventure. To that frontier land, men trekked from all parts of the world. They came by covered wagon, on horseback; they trudged wearily across the plains and desert to wrest the vast treasures of gold, silver, fertile valley and clear waters from the reluctant land. And they fought the Indians, the drought, and the myriad dangers of a wild and primitive land in the struggle for existence. And at their side came the women —the wives, sweethearts and daughters.

This was a land that created a history. Fantastic and colorful figures came out of the new wilderness. Many of them are familiar names to us; Billy the Kid, Jesse James, Calamity Jane, Belle Guinness, Wild Bill Hickok and Daniel Boone.

But there were others; many others. Men who rose to great heights of heroism as a matter of course in the routine of their daily lives. And then there were the women who loved them deeply and well and stuck with them through thick and thin, through hell and high water.

RANCH LOVE STORIES is dedicated to these men and women. In it we shall bring you their stories, the most exciting love stories to come out of the west. And they will be exciting. They will be the love stories of men as well as women. For, while the men who rode toward the setting sun left behind them the laws and rules by which they'd formerly lived, they took with them the same hopes and wishes and dreams of love they'd always known.

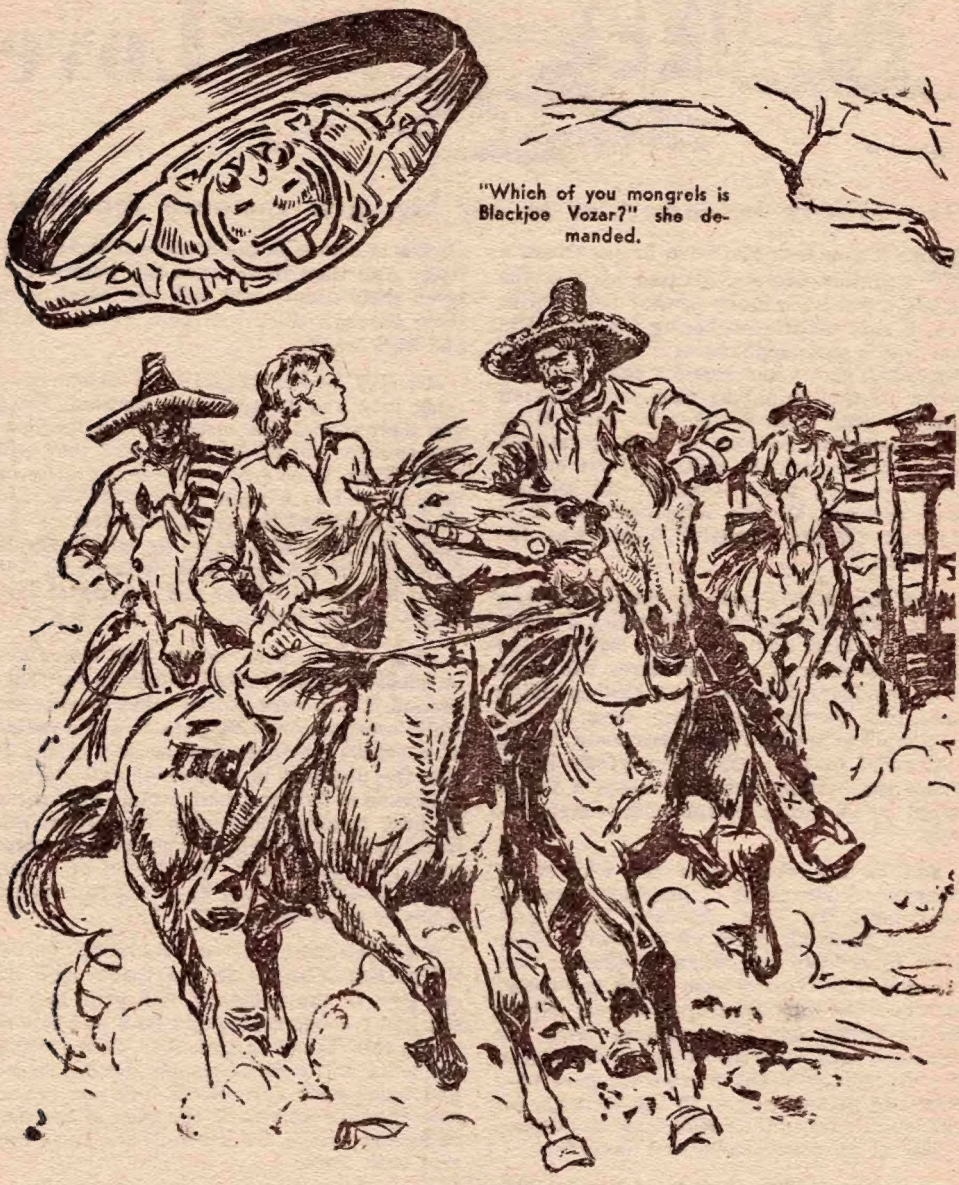
This was a time when life was lived hurriedly. Danger lurked always in the background. There were Indian raids, massacres; white renegades and outlaws. It was a period of constant wariness and sudden crisis. It was the ultimate in a colorful and glorious crescendo of living. A man declared his stand at first meeting, and soon thereafter was called upon to prove it. The cowpuncher slept under the stars with the dream of a girl riding beside him, and knew his saddlepard when he came upon her.

We welcome you to RANCH LOVE STORIES. You'll ride the trails with us, cut sign in the badlands, dab your loop at the lanky cowpuncher, and be a saddlepard to the tall, Texan ranger. And all the while, the wind will rustle through the dry brush and touch your hair. We'll fork our broncs over the hills and along the edge of the clay cliffs and across the rushing streams—and ride with love.

In RANCH LOVE STORIES we bring you the best in western romance, written by men and women who know the west well and love it for all it has to offer. In these pages they breathe again to precious life the glamor and the glory of the west.

The Editors

The Girl at Pueblo



"Which of you mongrels is Blackjoe Vozar?" she demanded.

CHAPTER I

Malpais Mystery

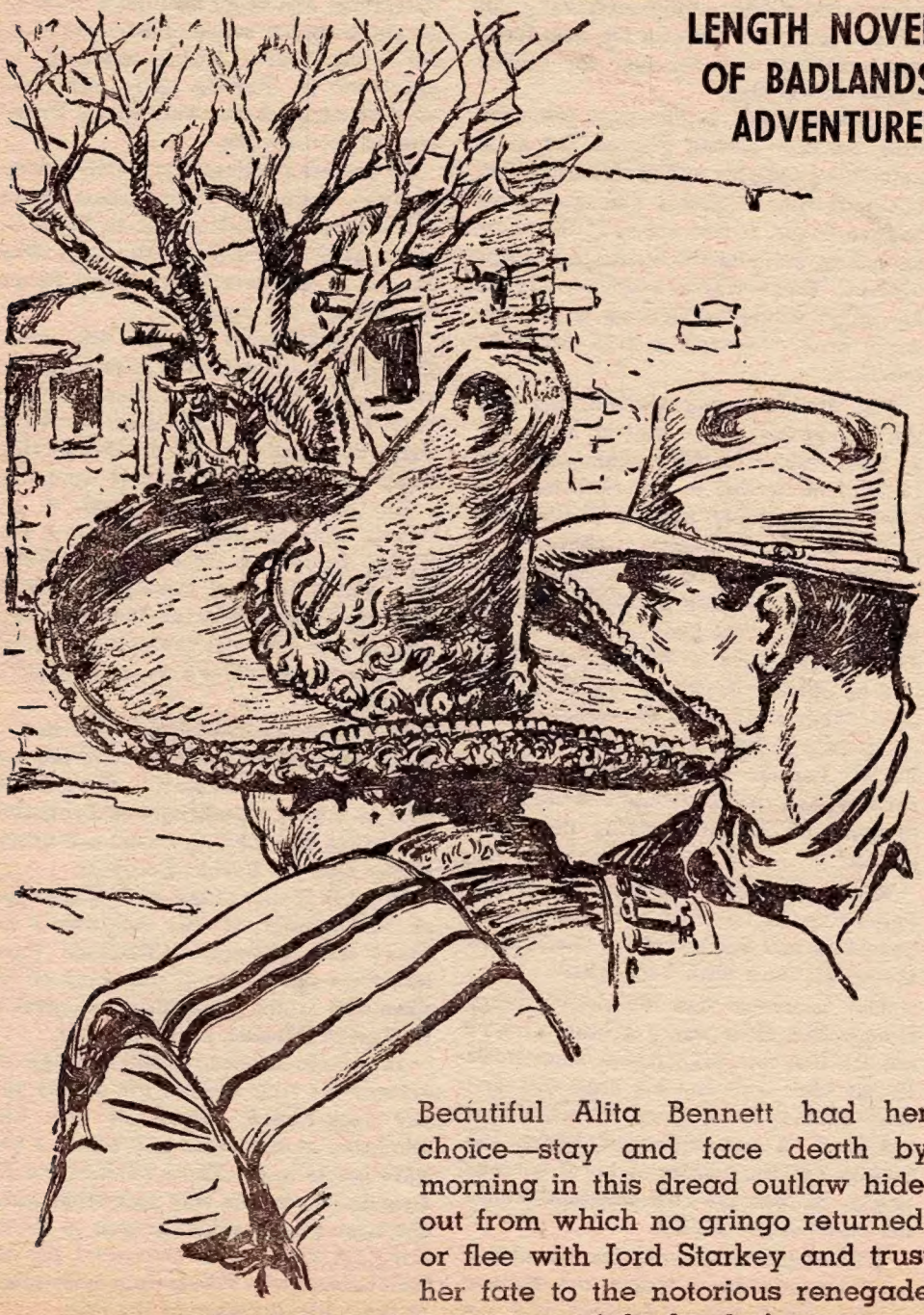
EVEN when the horse was only a mere speck in the circular field of his telescope, Primotivo knew that the rider slumped across the saddle was either dead or unconscious. The zig-zag course the sorrel was taking across the desert floor proved that no guiding hand was at the reins.

Perdido

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

• • • •

A BRAND NEW THRILLING FULL-LENGTH NOVEL OF BADLANDS ADVENTURE!



Beautiful Alita Bennett had her choice—stay and face death by morning in this dread outlaw hide-out from which no gringo returned, or flee with Jord Starkey and trust her fate to the notorious renegade of the border!

Now, at closer range, the horse must have scented water, for it was heading straight for the Gap. Primotivo had to come to a decision. He had standing orders to bushwhack any stranger who approached within Winchester range of his sentinel post, high on the *tufa* ledge which formed a lintel over the arched mouth of the Gap.

A dozen times in the past ten minutes, the *mestizo* had gone so far as to notch his gunsights on the slumped rider, but each time curiosity had stayed his trigger finger. It was not as if this were an enemy, stalking the entrance to their hideout. There was a fifty-fifty chance his bullet would be striking a man already dead, and such a deed would be unlucky.

The 'breed's roving eye had picked up the sorrel's dust better than an hour ago: a faint silver feather smudging the Chihuahua skyline to the southeast, almost indiscernible against the remote purple of the Pedragosa Range.

At first, Primotivo had mistaken the dust for Sebastiano's packtrain, returning from the rebel guerilla camp in the Pedragosas where he had disposed of a load of illicit ammunition and U. S. cavalry carbines. Then he remembered that Sebastiano was not due back at the Pueblo Perdido until tomorrow at the earliest; and the dust cloud was too small to mark an incoming string of *mulas*, anyway. . . .

What checked Primotivo's trigger finger was the fact that this approaching horseman had his left wrist shackled to the saddle horn with handcuffs.

The telescope told Primotivo other things. The rider was a gringo, first of all. He had lost his Stetson somewhere on the back trail and his head was covered with a thick mane of cinnamon-red hair. A cartridge belt looped his middle, but the holster at his thigh was empty. So was the rifle scabbard under his right saddle fender.

The sorrel quickened its stumbling pace when it drew under the shadow of the cliff where Primotivo had his lookout post. It knew that water, the sluicing Rio Grande itself, lay close at hand, through the Gap.

Primotivo stirred uneasily. Blackjoe Vozar had founded his smuggling ring on the principles of strict secrecy of operations and blind obedience from his carefully-chosen *venda* of underlings. By the same token, Vozar expected his henchmen to exercise their own judgment in emergencies. This struck Primotivo as such a time.

Casing his spyglass, the *mestizo* picked his way down the jutting seam in the cliff's face and walked out to block the sorrel at the entrance of the Gap. Holding his .30-30 alert for trickery, Primotivo circled the horse.

This red-headed gringo was alive; Primotivo could hear the breath gusting across his teeth, like a man suffering from sunstroke or starvation. So far as Primotivo could tell, the insensible rider was suffering from no visible wound.

Rio Grande mud had caked on the rider's boots and stirrup taps, proof that he had forded the river from the Texas side within the past twenty-four hours. Primotivo was pondering that clue when his eye was drawn to the peculiar design stitched on the rider's shopmade Justin cowboots.

It was the conventional Texas star of inlaid champagne leather, superimposed by a key in black kangaroo. The insignia took on a keen significance to Primotivo, and made him elect to escort the unconscious man to Pueblo Perdido.

What if it turned out he was mistaken as the identity of this red-headed *Tejano? Que diferencio?* Blackjoe Vozar had ways and means of disposing of visitors who might jeopardize the secret of El Pueblo Perdido, that was sure.

Primotivo slipped a hand through the sorrel's bit ring and led his quarry into the rock-ribbed fissure of the Gap, emerging at the north end where a ford gave access to the Texas bank of the Rio Grande. It was the only spot from which the Lost Pueblo could be seen in its entirety, a fact which accounted for the maintenance of a twenty-four-hour-guard at the south entrance to the Gap.

Prehistoric masons had erected the

pueblo under the overhang of eroded lava cliffs where the Rio Grande twisted through the gorge like a contorted artery to bleed its silt-red flood within stone's toss of the ancient building.

Inaccessible from the Texas side, the pueblo was ideal for the purposes of Blackjoe Vozar and his border-hopper legion.

Primotivo waded the Rio ford, leading the sorrel and its inert, steel-fettered rider. He saw Blackjoe Vozar squatting under the *sicomoro* tree at the river's edge, questioning the naked man who was tied to the tree trunk with sisal ropes knotted about his elbows.

MATT LUNDALL had been hanging from that rope for two days and two nights now, ever since he had been captured trying to slip past their canyon hideout astraddle a floating stump. His naked flesh was whip-welted and insect-chewed. Another day in the perishing heat would finish him.

Even so, Matt Lundall hadn't talked yet. Primotivo surmised that from the baffled fury in Vozar's eyes, as the smuggler *jefe* turned to stare at the horse and rider Primotivo was leading out of the shallows.

"*Que es*—another Americano?" Vozar demanded testily. "What have you here, 'Tivo? A dead man who should have been buried out in the desert?"

The *mestizo* waited until Vozar came over to the horse which had plunged its muzzle into the muddy water and resisted Primotivo's efforts to lead him out on higher ground.

"He lives, Senor. Observe the design on his boots. Could this *extranjero* be Jord Starkey?"

Vozar's eyes slitted with quickening interest. He reached up to inspect the rider's manacled wrist. Flesh had puffed out from the heat, nearly covering the constricting steel bracelet which fettered him to the saddlehorn. Vozar's fingers quested the side of the gringo's neck and found a pulse there, strong and rapid, the pulse of a man too long exposed to the sun.

"It could be so," Vozar mused, stooping to look up at the stranger's haggard, red-stubbled face. "Take him first to the *forjador* and have these irons struck off. Then carry him to my *sala* and have Pablito look at him. The gringo needs the attention of a medico, that is sure."

Vozar turned back to the almost naked prisoner lashed to the sycamore trunk. Matt Lundall was staring after the rider as Primotivo headed for the blacksmith shop on one end of the prehistoric communal dwelling. It was the first sign of interest Lundall had shown since a lariat had towed him, struggling, out of the Rio Grande.

"You have seen the stranger before, no?" Vozar asked sharply.

Lundall's face lost its vitality, muscles sagging back into the inscrutable lines which masked his features.

"I said—I wasn't talking," the prisoner whispered. "That . . . still goes."

Vozar rubbed his double chin with bunched knuckles, wondering at the look he had surprised on Lundall's countenance. This miserable, naked being was a two-bit *contrabandista* from up the river, hardly worthy of being called one of Vozar's competitors in the illicit border traffic. Still, it was not unreasonable to suppose that this tight-lipped Texan might be acquainted with a smuggler of Jord Starkey's caliber.

"You will not live to see another sunset, Lundall." Vozar spoke in Spanish, with an accent that was nearer the mother tongue of Old Castile than it was Chihuahuan. "Think it over tonight. The Jesuit gold of Santa Cedilla . . . or your freedom."

Matt Lundall's bleeding lips twisted in a sarcastic smile. His gaze was on the far end of El Pueblo Perdido, where a group of Mexicans were watching a blacksmith hammer the manacles off the red-headed stranger's left wrist.

"The gold," he whispered, "is where it will never be found by the likes of you, Blackjoe. You'd kill me even if I told you. Don't you suppose I know that?"

Then Matt's lips tightened again and he gazed off into the distance as though he were alone, ignoring the man at his side.

CHAPTER II

"Call Me Rojo"

THEY lounged in the twin hammocks slung in the shade of the overhanging cliffs next afternoon, Blackjoe Vozar and the red-headed stranger whom Primotivo had seen drifting northward across the Chihuahua malpais.

No stranger of gringo blood had ever visited El Pueblo Perdido before, excepting Matt Lundall. But *valgame Dios!* It was passing strange that Vozar should be sharing a bottle of his prized *aguardiente* with this stranger of the flame-colored hair.

"You have not seen fit to mention your name, amigo," Vozar commented, regarding his guest through a screen of cheroot smoke. "A not uncommon practice along the Rio, *es verdad.* But hardly the courteous thing to do under present circumstances, no?"

The stranger reclined full length in his hammock. He balanced a tall glass of the Valencia brandy on his chest, letting his left arm dangle lazily over the side, long fingers brushing the dirt.

"I believe I told you to call me Rojo," he answered slowly. "Does a name matter so much?"

He spoke in Spanish, but with a vague hesitancy which might have been the groping of a befogged brain rather than unfamiliarity with an alien tongue.

"Rojo—red," Vozar grunted. "An obvious nickname, true. "Your memory is a blank, then?"

Vozar swung his legs off the hammock. He was a bulky man, this prince of border piratry; given to dandified dress with much plush and gold braid. Pure Spanish ancestory was written across his clean-chiseled features, mirrored in his penetrating coffee-brown eyes. His speech was that of an *hildago* who was not a stranger to culture. And it was obvious that he regarded his guest as a fellow soldier of fortune, a man of dignity and undoubted courage, keenly intelligent and not in the least dismayed by his surroundings.

"I can't even tell you," Rojo said, "how I came to be handcuffed to my saddle horn, let alone how I got on the south side of the border."

Vozar eye the red-headed stranger quizzically.

"In your sleep last night, you talked of many things," the smuggler said finally. "In your delirium you spoke of a Texas Rangero named Eric Lind, and of a ride to Del Rio and the hangman's rope that waited for you there. It seems you escaped from Lind during a sandstorm and crossed the Rio."

The man who called himself Rojo cupped his glass with his palms to warm the brandy, letting its aroma tantalize his nostrils.

"Eric Lind," he mused. "Perhaps the best-known Ranger in all Texas. But why should he have been taking me to Del Rio to hang? Did I tell you that during my ravings?"

Vozar rolled the cheroot across his lips for a moment.

"You are lying, amigo."

The Spaniard voiced a fact, not a challenge. He indicated the Texican's cowboots with his cheroot.

"Let me prompt your memory, Senor. Consider your boots. A most novel design, obviously custom built. A star and a key. Does not that rouse something in your memory?"

Sipping his drink, Rojo stared down at his crisscrossed legs with idle detachment. They were long, saddle-warped legs, encased in bullhide chaps; legs in keeping with the massive structure of his torso and the solid thews of his arms and shoulders.

SUN and wind had bronzed Rojo's lean face to a hue nearly as mahogany as Vozar's cheeks, but his rusty hair and ice-blue eyes told of Nordic rather than Latin blood.

"They would seem to be the footgear of a cocky sport, no?" Rojo chuckled, the Spanish sliding easier off his tongue as the distilled peach liquor took hold. "The boots of a braggart who would overplay his hand, perhaps. A character trait which must have been leading me to a Texas Ranger's gallows."

Vozar leaned back in his hammock,

twisting the cheroot between his teeth with strong, prehensile fingers. He appeared to debate whether this red-haired Texican was parrying his questions deliberately, matching wits with him, or whether exposure and hardship had really obscured his mind and eclipsed his memory for the time being.

"Then the name Starkey means nothing to you, amigo?"

The smuggler *jefe* phrased the question casually, but a knotted vein on his temple quickened its pulse and his eyes watched the Texan's facial reactions with tense absorption.

"Starkey? . . . Jord Starkey." The stranger shrugged. "Who has not heard of Jord Starkey, Senor? You and Senor Starkey control the contraband traffic along the entire Rio Grande, I have been told. Starkey markets his loot in the United States, while you concentrate on supplying buyers in Mexico."

A frown gathered between Vozar's brows, and passed as quickly as it came. Whatever this stranger's game, he admitted his familiarity with underworld activities along the Border.

"Jord Starkey," Vozar said bluntly, "is what you gringos call a border-hopper, a man hounded by the Texas Rangers and the Border Patrol and the Mexican *rurale* police. A man who carries a reward only a few pesos less than my own, Senor. And Jord Starkey," he added significantly, "is said to have red hair like your own."

The Texan's blue eyes fixed themselves on Vozar's face. They were not the eyes of a man whose brain was blanked out by amnesia, Vozar decided.

"Your imagination is playing you tricks, Vozar," smiled Rojo. "This star-and-key design on my boots has made you jump at conclusions. Jord Starkey is not a friend of yours, then?"

Vozar stirred restlessly, watching the stranger massage the blue-green welt on his wrist where a handcuff had shut off his circulation.

"I have never met the man," Blackjoe Vozar admitted. "I had hoped one day we might become partners, *companeros*, rather than work the same territory as rivals."

As if he had made a decision after long debate with himself, Blackjoe Vozar hooked a beringed finger into a pocket of his brocaded *gaucho* jacket and fished out a folded square of cardboard.

"I lay my cards on the table, so," Vozar said in English. "Here ees a photograph of Jord Starkey."

Vozar tossed the folded placard over to his guest, who opened it and turned it right-side up to stare at the photograph printed under the legend $5,000 REWARD, DEAD OR ALIVE!

" 'Jordan Starkey, six-feet-two, weight one-eighty, age around thirty-five. Red hair, blue eyes,' " the stranger read the description under the photograph. "Wanted for the murder of Captain Einar Lind, United States Border Patrol. Send information concerning this criminal to Eric Lind, Company K, Texas Rangers, Del Rio."

Rojo looked up, meeting Vozar's triumphant grin with a shrug of recognition.

"You win, amigo," Rojo said, handing the reward dodger back to his host. "It is my photograph, obviously . . . Where did you get hold of it?"

Vozar flicked ash from his cigar and tucked the blazer back into his pocket.

"I am glad you do not keep up this silly pretense of having lost your memory," the smuggler said. "I found this Ranger's poster in a pocket of your chaparejos while you slept last night, Senor Starkey. A most foolhardy paper for a *contrabandista* of your reputation to be carrying."

CHAPTER III

The Return of Sebastiano

ROJO got to his feet, flexing his rangy muscles with a feline thoroughness, finally dropping a rope-calloused palm to stroke the empty holster at his flank.

As if to give point to the disparity of their positions, Blackjoe Vozar allowed a jeweled hand to drop casually to his side, his fingers brushing the rosewood

stock of the .45 Colt sheathed against his scarlet sash.

"I suppose," the Texan said finally, "that you have no intention of letting me live very long? The condemned man drank a hearty supper—of Valencia brandy."

Vozar shook his head slowly from side to side, frank approval of the red-headed Yankee evidenced by the smile which tarried on his lips.

"I mentioned a partnership, Senor Starkey," he reminded Rojo. "Consider. You have a well-established chain of markets in El Paso, Del Rio, San Antonio, perhaps even as far away as New Orleans and Chicago. My own *venda* here at El Pueblo Perdido is stocking the Mexican revolutionists with arms and supplies as fast as we can get them. Between us, we would control the contraband trade from El Paso to the Gulf, Senor Starkey."

Rojo fished makings from his shirt pocket and started building a cigarette, his face a study in concentration.

"Fifty-fifty—share and share alike, Vozar?"

The Spaniard laughed at the Texan's forthrightness.

"So like the gringo—so quick to do business, to drive the bargain," Vozar chuckled. "Of the profits, share and share alike. As to authority—it is I who gives the orders at El Pueblo Perdido, Senor Starkey. If we are to be partners, it is you who must pledge to live by my code, in return for the protection of this pueblo."

Thumbs hooked in gun harness, Jord Starkey sucked at his unfired quirly and stared around him. The frowning rimrocks on the Chihuahua side of the Rio canyon were like a row of broken teeth, inaccessible to anything short of a soaring *zopilote* hawk. Lost Pueblo was aptly named. . . .

"You are a demon for discipline, aren't you, Vozar?" Rojo changed the subject, his eye drawn to the pitiful figure sagging from the ropes under the riverbank *sicomoro*. "That poor devil yonder, I suppose, is being punished for some infraction of this code you spoke of? A slip of the tongue—a failure to notch his sights on a star-toter, perhaps?"

Vozar's eyes slitted against the glaring heat, staring off under the tasseled brim of his sombrero to regard the unhappy figure of Matt Lundall.

"Yonder *yanqui* is no compadre of mine, Senor Starkey. Perhaps you know him . . . Matt Lundall. A petty dabbler at our trade, who was lucky enough to stumble across a fortune in a village up the river. A job too big for him to handle alone."

Rojo touched a match to his cigarette. He saw the naked figure under the sycamore lash out desperately with a bare shin to dislodge a tormenting insect.

"What," he inquired, "was Lundall's error? Poaching on your territory?"

Vozar ground out the butt of his cigar under heel.

"Perhaps yonder gringo will tell his story to you, seeing that you are of the same blood," he suggested. "You have heard of the Jesuit monastery at Santa Cedilla?"

Rojo's eyes narrowed behind pluming cigarette smoke.

"Santa Cedilla . . . the Mexican village on the Rio below Presidio," he mused. "They say the friars at the monastery there have altar candlesticks wrought from Aztec gold and left there centuries ago by Cortez, as penance for his sins."

Vozar chuckled.

"Your memory is indeed clear," he said. "What *ladrone* would not pawn his soul for a chance at the treasures of Santa Cedilla? Even as Matt Lundall yonder. Lundall was clever enough to loot the monastery. But he failed to cross the Rio with his plunder."

"I begin to comprehend, Senor," he said dryly. "Lundall and his Jesuit treasure fell into your hands instead—and you are allowing the thief time to make his penance before he dies. You are a kind and devout man, Vozar."

The smuggler shrugged, taking no offense at Rojo's irony.

"My men trailed Lundall from the monastery and caught up with him, it is true. They even captured him. But the

gold and silver of Santa Cedilla was nowhere to be found on Lundall's packhorse. And he managed to dive into the Rio Grande and get away. Unfortunately, the canyon afforded no way for a swimmer to escape. We merely waited here for Senor Lundall to float past the pueblo —You see why we enforce our hospitality upon him, Senor Starkey."

"The *cabrone* won't tell you where he hid the loot?"

"*Es seguro*, he will not. That is why I am pinning my hopes on his talking to you, a fellow *yanqui*. But first I must know that we are partners, Senor."

Rojo hesitated for a barely perceptible interval, then reached out to grasp Blackjoe Vozar's extended hand.

"*Sta bueno*," the Texan grinned. "Who would have thought that Jord Starkey would ever take orders from his greatest rival? And now I will see what luck I have with this Texicano who profaned the chapel of Santa Cedilla."

Vozar settled in his hammock to watch, as the red-head strolled down to the river. He squatted for awhile by the bank, then walked over to the *sicomoro* tree where Matt Lundall hung in wilted dejection from his ropes.

The small-time smuggler's face was a swollen ruin, and his flesh bore the bruises of club and knuckle and whiplash in testimony of the lengths to which his captors had gone in an effort to wrest his secret from him.

Only his eyes were alive: eyes like fire flickering behind blue ice.

Lundall straightened his knees, flattened his shoulder-blades against the sycamore bole as Rojo approached. Their eyes met, locked, swift currents of recognition passing between them.

"So it's you!" Rojo gasped, moving closer. "I hadn't guessed. Matt. . . . You change names so often."

Lundall grinned crookedly, his gums bloody where teeth had been battered loose.

"It's been five years—or is it six?" the outlaw wheezed. "You look the same, Red. I knew you—when you came in with that 'breed yesterday. "

Rojo held out his cigarette, put it between the other's lips. Lundall sucked his lungs full of the smoke, closing his puffed eyelids in sheer ecstasy.

"You heard about Dad?" Rojo asked.

Lundall nodded, his eyes hardening.

"Yeah. He chose his path. I chose mine. They both led to the same end, Red." Lundall grinned bitterly, smoke forking from his nostrils. "Gimme another drag . . . thanks."

Rojo shot a glance toward the pueblo, saw that Blackjoe Vozar was watching, waiting.

"You're supposed to spill where you stashed that loot you took from Santa Cedilla, Matt." Rojo's voice was low, urgent. "My own safety sort of depends on it. I'm a prisoner here, the same as you."

Matt Lundall's body shook, raw anger flaming in his eyes.

"You'd try to bribe your own brother?" he snarled. "You're wearin' Blackjoe Vozar's collar? Since when did—"

From somewhere across the river a whistle interrupted Matt Lundall's outburst, a sharp series of signals megaphoned from the throat of the Gap which split the cliffs opposite the pueblo.

The signals were answered by the thin clang of a cow bell from a lofty lookout post high on the north scarp, where another sentry stood on guard over the river itself.

"Stall Vozar off—tell him I'll lead you to that *oro*, Red!" implored Lundall frantically. "Come back after dark and cut me loose—we can both get out of this hell-trap. I'll share that swag with you—"

Rojo moved away from the *sicomoro* as he saw the pueblo Mexicans break their siesta to emerge from a dozen doors on the ground floor of the communal dwelling. Blackjoe Vozar was heading out into the sunlight, making for the river.

"I'll be back tonight—if I can!" Rojo whispered through the corner of his mouth.

Rojo was ignored by the oncoming Mexicans as they trooped toward the river ford. Staring across the river, the red-headed Texan caught sight of a cavalcade of riders emerging from the

mouth of the Gap, *contrabandistras* in steeple-peaked sombreros and concha-hung bell-bottom pantalones, mounted on lather-flecked palominos whose saddles glittered with furbished silver trappings.

Vozar was waiting on the Texas bank as the home-coming smuggler party splashed their mounts across the belly-deep ford, leading a string of packmules laden with empty *albarda* packs.

This, then, would be Vozar's lieutenant, Sebastiano, reporting back from a trip to the *rebelista* garrison in the Pedragosas. Border gossip had it that Vozar was supplying the Mexican rebels with illicit weapons, stolen from a quartermaster warehouse at the U. S. Army post in Fort Stockton.

Watching from the outskirts of the crowd, Rojo's glance shuttled over the incoming riders and came to rest on a mounted figure he had not noticed before.

Knots of muscle hardened in the corners of his jaws as he realized that the rider was a girl, clad in mannish garb, her face obscured by a bandanna blindfold and her arms trussed against her sides with a hempen lass'-rope.

A scowl formed on Rojo's features as he saw Vozar elbow his way through the press of jabbering Mexicans and reach up to strip the blindfold from the girl's eyes. She was an American, her face framed with a wealth of chestnut hair.

"Since when," Rojo pondered, "has Vozar made a business of kidnapping women?"

CHAPTER IV

Held for Ransom

THE girl was beautiful despite the veil of alkali dust and the grime of perspiration and reddened skin caused by the constricting bandanna.

She was around twenty-five, Rojo judged; sun-bronzed and muscular from outdoor living, her bosom firmly curved under a dusty rodeo shirt of apricot-dyed satin. There was quality in the cut of her ribbed marsielles riding breeches, foxed with costly elkhide and tailored in the British mode, her taffy-brown riding boots fitted with blunt spurs.

Off-hand, Rojo ticketed her as a wealthy tourist or perhaps the American wife of a Chihuahua cattle baron, though he saw no gold band on her finger.

"So, Sebastiano!" Vozar remarked coldly, turning to his henchman. "Are we trafficking in *damiselas?* Have I not told you and all my *venda* that women are unlucky for us?"

Sebastiano, a swarthy, smallpox-pitted border-hopper whose bulging pot-gut and graying hair labeled him as a man in his fifties, refused to be abashed by his chief's hostile reception.

"But wait till you learn who the senorita is, *jefe!*" Sebastiano boasted smugly. "You have heard of the *yanqui* El Professor Bennett, *no es verdad?*"

A stir went through the massed group surrounding the pack train. An astonishment which transmitted itself to the Yankee onlooker with the red hair, standing inconspicuously on the outskirts of the crowd.

Sebastiano could be referring only to the celebrated New York archaeologist, Dr. Bogardus K. Bennett, a scientist who headed a joint expedition of the Mexican Republic and the United States, exploring the remote cordilleras for traces of the vanished Aztecan civilization . . .

It was the girl who broke the gelid silence then, her voice raspy with fatigue but edged with a sharp defiance which brought an approving grin to Rojo's lips.

"I see you mongrels know of my father," she said in classroom Spanish. "Are you the man," she demanded, bending a contemptuous glance at Vozar, "who calls himself the chief of these unchivalrous ruffians? Are you Blackjoe Vozar?"

Sebastiano's black eyes flashed with obscene amusement as he saw Vozar remove his ball-tasseled sombrero and bow in the courtly fashion which was a throwback to the era when his ancestors had been familiar figures in the court of Spain.

"I am, Senorita. You are the daughter of El Professor Bennett, no? My *segundo* here will have some explaining to do for bringing you here, that is so."

The amusement faded from Sebasti-

ano's swart countenance, to be displaced by a scowl akin to worry. Before he could speak, the girl captive unleashed her full fury on the group which surrounded her horse.

"Your thieving *segundo* has much more than kidnaping me to answer for, Senor Vozar. He murdered my father and his assistants in cold blood. Your men ransacked our camp and tortured our *peládo* porters, thinking we were concealing Aztec gold. I alone they spared—"

The girl's tirade met no response from the assembled Mexicans. To a man, they realized that the rash Sebastiano had violated one of the most vital tenets of Vozar's law. Women had no place in the code of the *contradbandistas* who enjoyed the sanctuary of El Pueblo Perdido.

Sebastiano, sensing the mounting wrath in Vozar's demeanor, licked his dry lips and spoke up in his own defense.

"We were returning from the *rebelista* camp, my *jefe*," he said hoarsely. "This so-beautiful pullet was ripe for the plucking. Senorita Bennett—she is a prize of the great value, Blackjoe. Consider. Her people will pay a king's ransom for her safe return."

Vozar's kindling temper flared then. Elbowing his way past Alita Bennett's horse, the smuggler chieftain reached up to seize Sebastiano's bony wrist and hauled his lieutenant bodily from stirrups.

Before Sebastiano could recover his balance, Vozar slapped him hard across the mouth, twice in rapid succession.

Pulped lips leaking blood, Sebastiano reeled free of the *jefe's* iron grasp, spitting an incisor into the dirt.

"But she will bring a king's ransom!" protested the smuggler frantically. "This senorita is more valuable than rubies! Her father was worth millions of *pesos*, that is so!"

Vozar dropped a hand to gun stock, his face twitching as he struggled to curb his temper.

"*Cabrone!* Spawn of a she-pig!" stormed the smuggler. "The kidnapping of gringo women is no business for Blackjoe Vozar. You will repent of this stupidity, Sebastiano."

Vozar turned his back on the deposed *segundo*, his eyes hot with rage as he clapped his sombrero back on his head and adjusted the chinstrap under his jaw.

"Primotivo," he barked at the *mestizo* standing next to him, "escort this *damisela* into the Pueblo. Give her food and drink. A king's ransom—*caramba!* A loco goat should know that kidnapping is the dangerous business, not worth the risk. A curse on Sebastiano and all his issue!"

Primotivo hastened to the girl's horse, severing Alita Bennett's bonds with a *cuchillo*. A dozen hands offered to assist the girl in dismounting, but she flung them aside and stepped lithely from stirrups, palms swatting trail dust from her flaring whipcord breeches.

As the crowd moved back, forming an aisle for Primotivo to escort the kidnapped girl to the Pueblo, the cowering Sebastiano was buffeted face to face with the red-haired stranger from Texas.

"A *tejano?*" roared the pack-train boss, wheeling to face Vozar. "So, Senor Blackjoe? A gringo at Pueblo Perdido? It seems I am not the only blundering fool who breaks the rules of our legion—"

The girl's eyes picked out her fellow countryman, meeting his steady glance. She saw Vozar drop an arm across the red-headed Yankee's shoulder.

"This gringo," Vozar said angrily, "happens to be Jord Starkey. You know how long I had hoped our trails could cross, that we might pool our trade . . . From this moment forward, Sebastiano, Senor Starkey here will be our *capitan* in your place!"

Rojo saw Alita Bennett's expression change. The instant their eyes had met, they had exchanged the unspoken greeting of a man and woman with a common ground of nationality. Rojo's mouth compressed as he saw scorn flash in the depths of the girl's amber eyes, and then she turned to follow Primotivo out of the crowd.

Rojo glanced back to see raw hatred flashing in Sebastiano's shoe-button eyes, and he knew he had made an inflexible

enemy in Vozar's camp. Up to now, Sebastiano had apparently been second in command of Vozar's border-hoppers. Now Sebastiano saw himself stripped of authority, his captaincy bestowed upon a flaming-haired stranger who had by some inexplicable circumstance joined their *venda* during his absence.

"Jord Starkey is a great *contrabandistra,*" Sebastiano stammered, his expression giving way to one of fawning servility. "Welcome to El Pueblo Perdido, Senor."

Rojo accepted Sebastiano's proffered hand, nodding his thanks while adding a mental reservation to make sure that this same hand never got the opportunity to plunge a knife in his back.

Staring off past Sebastiano's shoulder, Rojo saw Matt Lundall regarding him quizzically from the *sicomoro* tree, a look of mingled scorn and amusement smouldering in his brother's eyes as he watched Rojo and Vozar folow the crowd back toward the *contrabandista* headquarters.

CHAPTER V

Pistol Partners

SUNDOWN brought a flurry of activity to El Pueblo Perdido, as if demonstrating for the eyes of Jord Starkey the semi-military efficiency of Vozar's legions.

Hostlers stripped *albarda* packs from the exhausted mules and turned them out in a pole corral which hugged the cliff base west of the pueblo. Bags packed with chinking dobe dollars, rebel payment for U. S. cavalry carbines and ammunition, were stowed somewhere inside the prehistoric structure to await an equitable distribution of the loot in proportion to the risks run and the planning skill of those participating.

As dusk spread in a lilac haze down the gorge of the Rio Grande, the odors of cooking food wafted out to Matt Lundall's nostrils under the sycamore, as a *cocina* prepared an evening meal which he could share only at the cost of divulging his secret.

Starved for thirty-six hours, Matt Lundall might have weakened this night. But that was before his brother had arrived at Pueblo Perdido. Red had promised to return after dark. . . .

Rojo followed Blackjoe Vozar up the series of ladders which led to Vozar's private quarters on the uppermost terrace of the pueblo, a chamber which had been a ceremonial *kiva* for pagan ritual a forgotten aeon ago.

As Vozar's new *capitan,* Rojo had the privilege of dining with El Jefe, away from the noise of the mess hall on the second story. From Sebastiano down to the lowiest *mozo* in Vozar's staff, the red-headed Texan was accepted as a superior, an honor commensurate with the rank of a man as notorious as Jord Starkey.

Rojo had recovered consciousness in this circular-walled *kiva* this morning. Now he seated himself at Vozar's table and leaned back to appreciate the luxury with which Vozar had surrounded himself.

Shirazian rugs cushioned the adobe paving of the floor; Vozar's furniture was a collection of teak and mahogany and polished maple, the loot of haciendas both north and south of the Border, trophies of twenty years of riding shadowy trails.

Mozos had lighted lamps which hung from the pole-raftered ceiling of the prehistoric penthouse. They had loaded the table with succulent venison and tamales, a carafe of crystal wine fit for a monarch's taste, enchiladas and a brimming bowl of salad compounded of rare greens.

Garnishing a plate of frijoles with an exotic Chileno sauce, Rojo put the question to Vozar which had been nagging his mind ever since the arrival of Sebastiano's pack train.

"This Americano girl downstairs," he said tentatively, "what is to become of her?"

Vozar washed down his venison with a draught of French wine and patted his full lips with a damask napkin from the looms of Carrickfurgus.

"She is a problem," the smuggler *jefe* admitted. "Obviously, she is no common *desilinada,* no slattern to be kept here for

the entertainment of my venda. Senorita Alita is the aristocrat. And a dangerous woman to have learned the secrets of El Pueblo. I am sorry for her, *si.*"

Rojo toyed with his wine goblet, making wet rings on the furbished mahogany table.

"You are not holding her for ransom, then?"

Vozar looked up from worrying a morsel of white flesh from a breast of pheasant.

"*Por Dios,* you are not talking to the loco Sebastiano, Senor Starkey. Kidnapping, it is not the business for such men as you or I. No. The senorita has seen too much, heard too much."

Rojo's fingers drummed on the arm of his chair.

"The girl must die, then? You would seal her lips rather than release her on solemn oath to say nothing of what she has seen here?"

Reddish lights kindled in Vozar's eyes as he stared across the table at the *yanqui.*

"You are jesting, of course, Senor Starkey," he retorted. "Die she must. And soon. *Manana.* Oh, she will not suffer; she will be treated as a queen. Poison in her coffee perhaps, or a merciful bullet in the head while she sleeps. And perhaps the same medicine for that stupid cockerel Sebastiano."

They finished their meal in silence, and sandal-footed *mozos* appeared to clear off the table and set out a box of Havana cigars before withdrawing.

STANDING before the window which had been transferred from some wealthy *ranchero's* home to this adobe-walled fastness, Rojo puffed his perfecto thoughtfully and watched the silver-dollar moon westering toward the staggered rimrocks heming the Rio Grande.

From some remote part of the pueblo, Mexican voices lifted in song; smugglers relaxing after their trek into the Pedragosas, enjoying their guitars and their *tequila.*

Rojo turned to Blackjoe Vozar, who relaxed at his ease on a Chippendale divan.

"If I am to be your partner," the Texan said, "how long must my holster be empty, amigo? Or am I on probation until I have proved myself?"

Vozar chuckled without humor and swung his legs off the divan. He drew a ring of keys from inside his satin sash and unlocked a teakwood desk. From a drawer he took out a fine ivory-handled specimen of a .45 Peacemaker, its silver-plated barrel engraved like a fine watch.

"With my compliments, Senor Starkey!" purred the outlaw handing the weapon butt-first to his new *companero.* "A pistola which once belonged to a Governor of Texas."

Rojo accepted the polished six-gun, hefting it experimentally, thumbing back the knurled hammer of the museum piece. "*Muchas gracias,*" he said appreciatively. "No objections to me putting a few caps in the wheel?"

Vozar waved his cigar with an expansive gesture.

"We are partners, Senor Starkey. We must trust each other, *no es verdad?*"

Rojo jacked open the cylinder and punched five cartridges from his belt loops. In the act of thrusting them into the chambers of the cylinder, he lifted the gun to squint at a ceiling lamp.

The bore of the .45 was stoppered with a wooden plug. The first time the trigger was pulled the magnificent weapon would blow up in a man's hand.

"You trusted me, Vozar?" Rojo grinned, walking over to hand the six-gun to his host. "In a pig's eye, as they say in Texas—"

Vozar flushed, as he reached for the gun.

"In our business, a man must be cautious," he smirked. "You—"

Vozar never felt the blow. Rojo's right fist bunched and jabbed in a single smooth motion, a piston stroke punch that traveled less than ten inches before it exploded on the point of Vozar's plowshare chin.

Eyes glazed, Blackjoe Vozar sagged back on the Chippendale divan, his great body gone limp as a noodle.

Rojo went to work smoothly, without haste, by prearranged plan. He removed

Vozar's scarlet sash and twisted it into a gag which he knotted securely over the smuggler's face. Using Vozar's own gun harness, he strapped the Spaniard's legs at knee and ankle. With a pleated reata he found hanging from a wall peg, Rojo trussed Vozar's arms behind his back.

The ring of keys gave Rojo access to the chest of drawers which served as a repository for Vozar's arsenal of sidearms. The Texan selected a pair of matched Colts with rosewood butts, fully loaded and well oiled. One he thrust inside the waistband of his chaps. The other he snugged down in his own holster.

Making a final check on his unconscious prisoner, Rojo went to the window. The moon would set within the hour. Judging from the sounds of revelry coming from the smugglers' quarters on the ground floor, most of Vozar's crew would be dead drunk by then.

He could see Matt Lundall's nude body under the sycamore, and was reminded to rummage through Vozar's mahogany wardrobe for clothing suitable for his brother's getaway.

"A pity how a woman can change a man's plans," Rojo thought, with a certain regret. "Well, *'sta nada*. She may bring me luck before this night is over."

He rolled a pair of Vozar's pantalones and a gaucho jacket into a tight bundle, along with the pair of *zapato* sandals he judged Matt could get on. He wondered vaguely if there was a key on Vozar's ring which would fit the door of the cubicle where Alita Bennett was being held prisoner.

CHAPTER VI

A Matter of Identity

ALITA BENNETT tossed on the straw mattress of her pallet, unable to sleep. Her body cried out for rest and her quarters were passably comfortable, a barred window in the cubicle wall ventilating the chamber with a dankish breeze off the Rio Grande.

Two gruelling nights in the saddle lay between the girl and that appalling morning when bushwhackers had massacred her father's expedition and ransacked their camp in the remote cordilleras of the Pedragosa Range.

Except for a few rifles and field glasses, Sebastiano had obtained no plunder. Alita had feigned ignorance of the Spanish tongue during the interminable ride toward the north, and the *contrabandistas had*, therefore, talked freely in her presence during the daylight hours when they had kept in hiding.

She had heard enough to convince her that Sebastiano planned to hold her for ransom; that Blackjoe Vozar would welcome her arrival at El Pueblo Perdido as a rich prize indeed.

Bred to the rigors of an adventurous life as the daughter of a scientist who had led expeditions into the uncharted wilds of three continents, Alita Bennett endured her present ordeal without recourse to feminine hysterics.

The thick slab door of her cubicle was locked on the outside; she could hear the measured breathing of the sentinel posted in the hallway, her nostrils catching the narcotic odor of smoke from his *marijuana* cigarette.

Her spent nerves demanded sleep, but a numbing apprehension kept her tinglingly awake. Night had fallen black as swathing velvet inside the river canyon, and with it came a host of night sounds —the pathos of bullfrogs trilling in the marshy strip below the ford, the hoot of a foraging night owl, the occasional laughter and clink of glasses where Mexicans were carousing somewhere inside the Pueblo.

She was beginning to drowse when noises outside the door brought her upright on the pallet. She heard a muffled grunt from the sentry, followed by the heavy thud of a body sliding down the door panels and thumping against the stone floor.

Alita Bennett waited, hand to throat, blood tom-tomming in her eardrums. She stiffened as her ears caught the grate of a key in an oiled lock, then the door pivots grating in their swivel sockets.

"Miss Bennett?"

The whisper from the open doorway held the drawl of an American, a Texan,

rather than the guttural slur of a Mexican. The girl held her breath, waiting. Then a match flared between cupped palms for an instant, and she recognized the red-headed man she had heard Vozar address as Jord Starkey.

"Make no sound," whispered the Texan, blowing out the match. "Come on. I've got horses waiting outside."

Alita stood up, cringing back against the adobe wall.

"What for? Why have you come?"

The Texan stepped into the room, groping through the darkness to grasp her wrist.

"Vozar isn't going to hold you for ransom, Miss Bennett. He'll kill you—poison your breakfast—anything to get rid of you. We've got to make a getaway tonight or not at all."

Still, the girl drew back, struggling to pull free of the Texan's grasp.

"How can I trust you?" she panted. "Jord Starkey . . . I've heard of you, of your killings, your outlawry. How do I know I wouldn't be worse off—"

The grip left her wrist and she heard the Texan move back out of the doorway.

"There's no time to argue, Miss Bennett. Are you coming?"

Hardly acting of her own volition, Alita Bennett groped across the threshold, reaching out to grasp the hand she knew would be waiting for her.

She shuddered involuntarily as her booted foot trod on the prostrate sentry's arm. Then Rojo was leading her through the clotted gloom of a pueblo passageway. Shoulder to shoulder, they moved out of a low archway into the starlight, the Rio breeze cool on their faces.

Without pausing, Rojo led the girl down the wall of the prehistoric dwelling, in the direction of the corrals. Fifty yards from the pueblo, three saddled horses, among them her own claybank gelding, were tied to the pole fence.

"An extra horse?" she whispered, accepting a pair of reins.

Rojo shook his head.

"You aren't the only prisoner here at the pueblo, ma'am. Follow me close and don't talk."

THEY moved in the direction of the *sicomoro* tree upstream from the Rio Grande ford, the steel-shod hoofs of the three mounts making no sound on the fetlock-deep dust.

Under the arching limbs of the sycamore, Rojo halted and passed the two sets of bridle reins to the girl.

"Wait here," he whispered.

Untying a bundle of clothing from behind the cantle of his own sorrel, Rojo walked over to where Matt Lundall stood naked and shivering in the night wind. Hunger and exposure had numbed the man to the ragged edge of paralysis, causing him to slump to his knees when Rojo severed the ropes binding his elbows.

"You're not—taking the girl along?" Lundall asked hoarsely, as Rojo helped him into the clothing he had brought from Vozar's wardrobe. "We might have to shoot our way out of the Gap—"

Rojo pulled the tight-fitting Mexican boots over his brother's feet before answering.

"She's going with us. Vozar aims to murder her tomorrow."

Matt Lundall's strength was too far spent for him to reach the horses on his own. Alita Bennett stared curiously as she watched the Texan lift Lundall bodily aboard the extra saddle horse, saw Lundall pick up the reins, clinging to the horn for support.

"How about . . . a gun, Red?"

In the starlight, Lundall saw his brother shake his head. The outlaw grinned bleakly.

"Still don't trust me, eh? You never did trust me, Red. Not since we was knee-high to the loadin' gate of a Winchester. But you'll need a gun hand to side your play tonight."

Alita Bennett sensed the animosity which traveled like electric waves between the two men. In both their minds, the memories of bitter yesterdays were storming in torment, each recalling the enmity which had been a barrier between them since their boyhood days over in the Neuces country, when their father had been the marshal of a hell-ridden cowtown.

"It's not a matter of trust, Matt. You are too weak to handle a gun."

Rojo stepped into saddle and reined his sorrel around to face Lundall and the girl.

"I'll cross first," he whispered. "Might be a sentry covering this end of the Gap. You think you can ride, Matt?"

Lundall shrugged, flexing his throbbing arms.

"I'm *bueno.*"

Rojo spurred off down the bank and they lost sight of him midway across the Rio Grande ford. Alita Bennett nudged her claybank gelding alongside Lundall's stirrup.

"It goes to show a person," she whispered to the outlaw, "there's a lot of good in the worst of men. Jord Starkey must be risking a lot to save our lives tonight."

Lundall's brows arched as he stared at the girl.

"Starkey? You think that red-head is Jord Starkey?"

It was Alita Bennett's turn to show surprise.

"Of course. It's no secret. I heard Vozar appoint Mr. Starkey as his *capitan* yesterday. You've heard of Starkey? He's as notorious along the Border as Vozar himself."

Lundall laughed under his breath.

"I know Jord Starkey well. Well enough to know he ain't my brother, that's a cinch."

CHAPTER VII

Hounds of Hades

BEFORE Alita Bennett could weigh the import of Matt Lundall's cryptic statement, Rojo's low whistle reached their ears above the burbling of the current across the sandbar.

Stirrup to stirrup, they spurred out into the shallow flood, the water surging over their stirrups in mid-river. Rojo was waiting for them at the mouth of the Gap, starlight glinting off the Colt in his right hand.

"No guard at this end of the tunnel," Rojo reported. "I'll take the lead. At the far end, wait for me to check on the sentinel on the ledge."

Steel-shod hoofs sounded like racketing hammers on the rubble of the Gap, as they moved single file toward the glowing arch of starglow overlooking the Chihuahuan desert to southward.

Just inside the entrance, Lundall and the girl reined up. Lundall cursed softly as he watched his brother gig the sorrel out on the sandy flats. If the night sentry spotted Rojo now, their getaway could be nipped in the bud.

Even as the Texan reined his horse around to peer up at the sentinel post on the *tufa* lintel above the Gap, the night stillness was shattered by the thunder of a Winchester.

Rojo ducked instinctively as a steel-jacketed slug plucked a slot through the brim of the Mexican scombrero he was wearing.

Twenty feet overhead, the spear of gun-flame told the rider where Vozar's guard was crouching. The double click of a Winchester lever pumping another cartridge into the breech guided Rojo's aim as he notched his Colt sights at an almost vertical angle and squeezed off a shot.

Through pluming gunsmoke, Rojo saw a dark figure lurch to his feet against the gray cliff wall. A .30-30 clattered down, missing the sorrel's muzzle by inches.

Then the sentinel teetered forward and plummeted down past the mouth of the Gap, landing with a grisly thump on the sandy floor.

Indistinct in the moonlight, the contorted face of the dead man was visible to the mounted Texan.

It was Sebastiano, Vozar's ex-*segundo*, who had drawn the menial task of night guard duty here at the Gap as the first punishment for his infringement of Vozar's rules. In a way, the murder of Dr. Bogardus K. Bennett had been avenged. . . .

"Come on!" Rojo shouted, realizing that the need for silence was past. "Those Mexicans over at the pueblo will be swarming on our trail like a nest of hornets—"

Lundall and Alita Bennett emerged from the clotted shadows of the Gap and spurred into a gallop, following Rojo westward along a trail paralleling the cliffs.

They kept up the grueling pace for ten miles before reining up on a cactus-spined hogback to let their horses blow. Behind them, the false dawn was staining the eastern skyline.

LUNDALL was in a bad way. Exhausted by his ordeal at Vozar's hands, he had remained in saddle through sheer will-power locking his hands on saddle horn and mane.

Rojo dismounted and unbuckled an *alforja* bag, taking out a bottle of whiskey and a package of tortillas he had managed to smuggle out of the Pueblo Perdido. He uncorked the liquor bottle and handed it to Lundall, allowing his brother two good swigs of the fiery bourbon before wresting the bottle from Lundall's grasp.

"Where—we headin', Red?" panted the outlaw, seizing the tortilla cakes greedily and cramming the soggy food between his teeth.

Rojo stared off westward, noting the rugged expanse of corrugated malpais which lay ahead.

"Santa Cedilla. It's the closest town. There's no way across the Rio short of there."

Wolfing down his food, Matt Lundall's strength rallied perceptibly as the whiskey took hold.

"Santa Cedilla," he mused, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "You'll have to drop me off short o' that burg, Red. I'm about as popular around Cedilla as a hydrophoby dog. And I reckon you know why."

Rojo stared at his brother in the gray light of approaching dawn, and Alita Bennett saw strong emotions twitching at the Texan's mouth.

"Where'd you stash the stuff you stole from the Jesuit monastery, Matt?"

Lundall's grin faded. He eyed his brother warily.

"I didn't let Blackjoe Vozar torture that information out o' me, Red. You reckon I'd tell you?"

Rojo tightened his saddle girth and swung back into stirrups. He seemed oblivious of Alita Bennett's presence alongside his sorrel. The girl sensed that a crisis was building up between these two oddly-contrasted riders, but the cause of her hunch was a mystery, something she could attribute only to intuition.

"Matt, I'll give it to you straight." Rojo's voice intimated that he had reached a decision within himself, a decision from which he had no intention of swerving. "I saved your life tonight. In return, I expect something from you."

Lundall's blackened, puff-lidded eyes strayed to the six-gun at his brother's flank. His jaw set in a hard line.

"Such as—?"

"The treasure you choused from the monastery. You got to return that, Matt."

Lundall considered his brother's ultimatum thoughtfully.

"And if I don't?"

Rojo's soulders lifted and fell.

"You know the alternative that leaves me, Matt. It wouldn't be easy to send my own brother—Matt, I've stood a lot from you. But I draw the line at your desecrating a chapel altar. It ain't lucky."

Lundall laughed, a jarring laugh that covered his relief at a crisis safely over and done with.

"You're a fine one to drag the church into this deal, Red!" jeered the outlaw. "How long has it been since you attended?"

For the first time, Rojo seemed to remember the presence of the girl at his side.

"We've both strayed a long way from the paths our mother taught us to follow, Matt," he said gently. "But that's no excuse. It gets a man nowhere to belittle the faith of his fathers. I'm not trying to be holier-than-thou. But I aim to see that treasure restored to the Jesuit priests, if I have to—"

A sharp cry from Alita Bennett interrupted the Texan. The girl was staring

off down their back trail, squinting into the scarlet glare of approaching dawn.

"Riders!" she gasped, pointing. "Do you suppose—"

Rojo and Matt Lundall stared off to eastward, picked up the smudge of dust which was lifting off the desert trail, clearly visible against the dawn-lit skyline.

"Vozar hit our trail sooner than I expected," Rojo said tersely. "He's got ten-twelve Mexicans with him, I'd judge. How far is it to Santa Cedilla, Matt?"

Lundall's face was ashen.

"We're better'n half way there—but the rough country lies ahead of us, Red. They'll spot us inside of an hour. And it'd be suicide to fort up and stand off a siege. We better separate."

Rojo shook his head.

"We stick together," he said. "Roll your hooks, Miss Bennett. And you might pray for a miracle. We'll need one."

They sent their mounts rocketing down the west slope of the hogback, fought through a cactus jungle in time to see the red ball of the sun lift over the Mexican desert behind them.

Vozar and his avenging pursuers had cut their lead in half, speeding across the flat desert floor. This malpais flanking the Rio Grande was home territory to the *contrabandistas*. They knew perhaps a dozen secret trails by which they could ride ahead and cut off their quarry.

Not sparing their horses, the three fugitives left the trail and followed a curving ridge crest to the northwest, to avoid the jagged lava beds ahead of them. Before the sun was an hour high, Vozar and his henchmen had cut their lead to less than two miles and the flash of sunlight on their rifle barrels and silver conchas was visible to the naked eye.

Alita Bennett appraised their chances and found nothing but despair facing them. From what Matt Lundall had said, she surmised that the refuge of Santa Cedilla was a goal impossible to reach before Vozar's riders cut them off, surrounded them.

A north-south trail crossed their route of flight, and the three riders reined up in the shelter of a tangled jumble of mountainous boulders to rest their mounts.

Rojo, sizing up the boulder nest as a possible spot for a last-ditch stand, let his eye follow the hoof-beaten trail northward. It led in the direction of the blue gulf which marked the grand canyon of the Rio Grande, ten miles away.

"You know this Chihuahua territory better than I do, Matt," panted the Texan. "Any chance of this trail leading to a break in the canyon?"

Lundall scowled thoughtfully.

"The gorge of the Rio is a thousand feet deep along here," he said. "This trail I know, yes. It leads to a goatherder's camp in that *barranca* yonder. A friend of mine."

New hope burned in Rojo's eyes.

"Any kind of a house where we could stand off a siege?"

Lundall glanced uneasily at Alita Bennett, licked his lips, then shifted his eyes toward his brother.

"This goatherder's place is where I—I've holed up a time or two when the *rurales* were breathin' down my neck, Red. I'd be betrayin' a confidence to show you where it is. But put yourself in my hands, and we'll shake off Blackjoe and his wolf pack."

Rojo's eyes mirrored suspicion for a fleeting instant, but the presence of Alita Bennett seemed to make up his mind.

"'*Sta bueno*—you hold the aces, Matt. Lead the way."

They headed north up the clearly-defined trail, topping a naked granite tableland and dipping into a steep-walled *barranca* which had once been the bed of a tributary of the Rio Grande.

An hour later, deep under frowning cliff walls which cut off the hot punishing glare of the sun, Matt Lundall pointed to a rock-walled *jacal* hut built on a ledge where the trail ended in a blind drop-off to the *barranca* floor, hundreds of feet below.

As a robber's roost, Rojo had never seen a better-located lay-out. Accessible only by the trail they had just traveled, a lone man with a rifle could stand off the assault of an army.

Even as they dismounted, the slab door of the stone shack opened and a towering, cinnamon-bearded man stepped outside, covering them with the weaving barrel of a Winchester .45-70.

Then, as the stranger spotted Matt Lundall, he grounded the stock of the rifle and grinned a welcome.

"Howdy, Matt!" chuckled the bearded man. "Didn't know you for a minute, in them fancy *gaucho* duds."

Lundall shot a sidewise glance at his brother, then headed over to shake the stranger's hand.

"I'll vouch for the girl an' this—this jasper," Lundall said nervously. "Blackjoe Vozar and a few of his greasers are bayin' on our backtrack like the hounds of Hades. We had to sashay down here to save our pelts."

The red-bearded man lifted his flop-brimmed Stetson to Alita Bennett, then extended a hand to Rojo.

"You folks are safe from Vozar now," he said reassuringly. "My name is Starkey. Jord Starkey. Any friend of Matt's is a friend of mine, I always say."

Alita Bennett gave a little startled cry as she saw Rojo's hand disengage itself from Starkey's clasp and streak to holster. It came up with a six-gun trained at the smuggler's midriff.

"I've often wondered when I'd meet the hombre who murdered my father, Starkey," Rojo grated. "I'm Matt's brother. Eric Lind of the Texas Rangers."

CHAPTER VIII

Treachery

FOR the space of a dozen clock-ticks, the stunned tableau held. Then Eric Lind reached out to jerk the Winchester from Jord Starkey's grasp.

"I had hoped," the Ranger went on, "to meet you under less embarrassing circumstances, Starkey. It don't seem exactly sporting, seeing as how we'll use your hideout to stand off Blackjoe Vozar. But—"

Lind broke off, as he saw Matt Lundall circling around behind him. Tossing the Winchester to one side, the Ranger jerked his second .45 from the waistband of his chaps and swung it to cover his brother.

"Don't crowd me, Matt. You had no intention of double-crossing Starkey here."

Lundall relaxed, held at bay by the Ranger's second gun. He caught the red-haired outlaw's eye, and understanding flashed between them.

"I'll at least give you a better break than you gave Dad, Starkey," the Ranger went on. "Dad's border patrolmen witnessed his murder. You shot him in the back, without a chance. I'll at least give you your chance to escape hangrope, in front of a judge and jury."

Jord Starkey turned to stare at Alita Bennett, and his lips parted in a grin.

"Looks like I'm roped and hogtied for brandin' don't it, ma'am?" chuckled the border-hopper. "Matt, don't look so glum. I don't hold it ag'in you for leadin' a Ranger to my hideout. It was all you could do under the circumstances."

Lundall's nostrils twitched as he detected the savory aroma of coffee coming from Starkey's shack.

"How about a little bait, Red?" he asked the Ranger. "I'm plumb tuckered to a frazzle. The girl here needs some grub."

Eric Lind pursed his lips, not unaware of the grim humor of the situation. Jord Starkey, despite his outward indifference to his capture, was as dangerous as a leashed cougar. From past experience, the Ranger knew better than to trust his brother. Matt Lundall—christened Matthew Lind—was obviously Starkey's partner. Since boyhood, Matt had aligned himself on the opposite side of the law against Eric and their martyred father.

"We'll do it this way," the Ranger said. "Miss Bennett, you go in and pour us some coffee. Better yet, fetch me that coil of rope on my pommel yonder. I'll hogtie our host first."

The girl, white-faced but steady-nerved, hurried to unbuckle the Ranger's coiled lass rope from the sorrel's saddle. Jord Starkey turned his back and placed his arms at his side, making no show of resistance as Lind dropped the noose over

his shoulders and lashed his arms to his sides.

That done, Lind lifted Starkey's six-gun from its holster and dropped it in his saddlebag.

"I'll show you where Jord keeps his grub, ma'am," Matt Lundall volunteered, limping toward the door of the shack. "I been here plenty times before."

The red-headed Ranger watched Starkey head over to the cabin and seat himself on a bench beside the doorway. Posting himself on the threshold, Lind kept an alert eye on Alita and his brother as they entered Starkey's abode.

MATT LUNDALL opened a box cupboard and took out three tin cups, setting them on a split-pole table in the center of the room. Then he stoked the outlaw's wood stove, aware that the Ranger was watching him like a hawk. Lind was taking no chances on Lundall laying a hand on a butcher knife or gun.

"If Blackjoe Vozar's in the offing, you better stable your nags, Lind," suggested Jord Starkey. "They'd be in the line of fire if Vozar's hard cases show up on the ledge trail yonder."

The Ranger nodded gravely. Food and drink was the imperative need of the moment. He, himself, was nearing exhaustion.

Inside the hut, Matt Lundall was pouring coffee into a pot. Alita Bennett was busy buttering slices of dutch oven bread at the table. She had located a smoked ham in Starkey's cooler, with which to prepare a meal.

"Unsaddle our horses, Matt," Ranger Eric Lind ordered brusquely. "And don't try to pick up Starkey's rifle."

Twenty minutes later, when Lundall had led the horses into Starkey's lean-to stable behind the rock cabin, Alita Bennett announced that the food was ready.

Lundall seated himself on the bench beside Starkey and wolfed down a thick ham sandwich, blowing on his tin cup of steaming black coffee. He kept a worried eye on the gray ribbon of trail down-canyon, alert to sound the alarm if any of Blackjoe Vozar's killers came in view.

Lind, squatting in the doorway, accepted a tin cup of coffee from the girl and downed it greedily. Alita refilled the cup and brought him a cracked plate heaped high with buttered ham sandwiches.

In the act of taking his first swallow, the Ranger was conscious of a heavy feeling in his arms. His eyes suddenly went off focus, accompanied by a stabbing sensation in the pit of his stomach.

Dropping the plate off his lap, Lind rose dizzily to his feet. He was conscious of the fact that Matt Lundall and Jord Starkey were staring at him, eyes bright, waiting.

"Miss Bennett," choked the Ranger. "Take . . . gun. I—I—"

Darkness spun in a tight vortex around Eric Lund. He saw the girl get up from her chair inside the hut and start forward, as the six-gun slid from his limp grasp.

Then he crumpled in an inert heap on the doorstep, his senses fading as Matt Lundall pounced to snatch the Colt .45 from Alita Bennett's fingers.

"You—you've poisoned him!" cried the girl, as she recoiled from the gun in Lundall's fist.

Lundall jerked the other Colt from the waistband of his brother's chaps.

"Knock-out drops," he said. "I doped the coffee with chloral hydrate crystals when Red thought I was puttin' salt in the pot to settle the grounds. He'll rally around—in due time."

CHAPTER IX

Treasure Trail

THE yellow glare of a coal-oil lantern hanging from a rafter was the first thing Eric Lind was able to concentrate on when his brain reached the end of its long dark void of insensibility.

Propping himself up on an elbow, the Texas Ranger found that he was stretched on Jord Starkey's bunk. Night had fallen in the canyon outside; the faint glimmer of stars penciled through chinks in the soddy roof.

His first impression, as thought penetrated slowly into his throbbing brain,

was that he was alone. Then a rattle of tinware on the rusty cookstove caused him to turn.

Alita Bennett was crossing the room, a steaming cup of coffee in her hand. Lamplight put a halo around the girl's chestnut hair as she knelt beside the bunk and placed the tin cup against his lips. The odor of coffee made him retch.

"Try to swallow some of this, Eric," she urged gently. "Your brother put a drug in the other batch. I brewed this potful myself. It'll help clear your head."

He choked down half a cup of the hot java, felt his nausea slacken as the coffee warmed his belly. He settled back on the soogans and closed his eyes, trying to marshal his thoughts.

"Where—"

"We're alone, Eric," Alita said, reading his thought. "And there's no way to get out. They've been gone for two hours. The door's padlocked on the outside. There are no windows."

He swung his legs off the bunk, holding his aching temples between his hands. The full impact of his brother's treachery stirred a cold brooding hate deep inside him.

"You know—who I am?" he asked irrelevantly, accepting the coffee cup she put in his hands.

Strange lights flickered in the girl's amber eyes.

"The bravest Ranger in all Texas," she said, and laughed at his embarrassment. Then her face sobered. "Why did you do it, Eric? Why did you make Blackjoe Vozar—and everyone—believe you were Jord Starkey?"

He regarded her thoughtfully, sipping his coffee.

"Starkey killed my father," he said bluntly. "Dad was a Border Patrol inspector. Starkey shot him in the back. I vowed to track him down . . . or cash in my chips trying it."

He stared moodily around the hut, eyes flickering momentarily on an empty gun rack above the door.

"They left no firearms," she said, again analyzing his unvoiced thought. "You must give your brother credit for at least one thing, Eric. Starkey would have murdered you, drugged and helpless as you were. But Matt insisted that he owed you his life at Pueblo Perdido. So he made a bargain with Starkey before he untied him. He mentioned a jeweled crucifix worth a king's ransom—"

The Ranger nodded bleakly, his eyes bitter in the lantern glow.

"The chapel treasures from Santa Cedilla," he explained. "Matt bought Starkey off by agreeing to split his plunder. . . . Matt all the same as signed his own death warrant."

"What do you mean?"

"Starkey may have befriended Matt in the past. But he's a cruel, vicious man. A lone wolf, always. Friendship, his solemn promise—they would mean nothing to Starkey, once he gets those golden candlesticks and Jesuit plateware in his hands. He'll put a bullet in Matt's back and come back here to do the same to me—to us."

Alita crossed the room and returned with the coffee pot, pouring the Ranger another drink.

"They made their plans in my hearing," she recounted. "It seems your brother was being hard pressed by Blackjoe Vozar's men, after he had robbed the monastery. He couldn't get across the Rio with his loot, so he threw his packsaddles into a quicksand *sumadero*. The packsaddles have a rope tied to them, a rope that leads out of the *sumadero* and which Matt covered over with drift sand. He told Starkey they'd recover the packbags before sunrise tomorrow. That's where they've gone."

The Ranger stared at the girl over the rim of his cup, wondering vaguely what their destinies might have been if they had met in circumstances not overshadowed with impending doom. . . .

"So that's the secret Vozar couldn't torture out of Matt. . . . Did he mention where his quicksand bog was located?"

"They mentioned Amapola Creek—I got the impression it was not far from here. They waited until it got dark, just in case Vozar and his crew might s—"

The girl's words were lost in the blast of a gunshot just outside the door. A tinkling sound as of falling metal frag-

ments followed close on the heels of the explosion, and the slab door swung open slowly on its wagon-axle pivot, moving of its own weight. A bullet had shattered Jord Starkey's padlock—

"*Manos altos!*" The order out of the night had a familiar Spanish ring "Come out with your hands up, Senores! We have your *cabana* surrounded!"

Alita Bennett gripped the Ranger's arm impulsively as he came to his feet, tossing the coffee cup aside.

"Vozar," he whispered, shoving the girl behind him. "Let me handle this, Alita—"

He stepped out under the lantern, in full view of the gunmen crouched in the shadows outside the doorway.

"Come in, Vozar!" he called softly. "We're not armed."

There was a brief pause. Then the towering figure of Blackjoe Vozar appeared on the threshold, behind the weaving barrel of a carbine. At the Spaniard's back were other dark figures, sombreroed Mexicans from El Pueblo Perdido, their faces gray with the dust of a grueling chase. Vozar's wolfpack had waited for darkness to invade Starkey's box canyon. . . .

"*Por seguro,* Senor Starkey speaks the truth!" Vozar ejaculated puzzledly. "Why are you a prisoner here? What kind of a trick is this, Senor?"

Lind's arms were raised before the menace of the *jefe's* rifle. He lowered them now, having waited for Vozar to note that no belt was buckled around his midriff.

"I am a prisoner," the Texan grinned, "because I am not Jord Starkey. If you had searched me closely enough at El Pueblo Perdido—"

As he spoke, Lind raised his right leg and hooked the spike heel over the edge of the bunk. Vozar stiffened warily as he saw the Texan grip a protruding leather flap on his boot. The sound of ripping stitches followed, as Lind tore open the star-and-key inlay on the Justin. Revealed in the lining of the boot was a silver star, its tips circumscribed by a silver circle.

"A *Rangero* badge!" Vozar cawed thickly, as Lind tossed the dread emblem of Texas law on the floor at his feet. "Then you—"

"I am Eric Lind," the Ranger confessed. "The prisoner you dragged out of the Rio was my brother, Vozar. He was baptized as Matt Lind before he hit the owlhoot. You forced me to show my cards before I was ready—"

Mexican gunmen, headed by Primotivo the *mestizo,* crowded into the rock cabin, staring in amazement at the Texas Ranger's star at Vozar's feet. They saw their *jefe* blink dazedly and pull from a pocket of his brocaded jacket the reward poster which offered a $5,000 reward for the outlaw whose name was given as Jord Starkey but whose photograph was that of this lawman they held at bay.

"That blazer?" grunted the Ranger. "A simple matter of paying a printer to turn out a bit of forgery, Vozar. Didn't it ever occur to you that a *contrabandista* such as Jord Starkey would never be photographed? Or would Starkey wear boots with a tell-tale star and key design inlaid in the leather?"

Vozar let the fake reward poster flutter to the floor.

"But why—how should a Rangero know of El Pueblo Perdido—"

"The Rangers knew only the approximate location of your hideout, Vozar," Lind said. "No lawman had ever penetrated the Gap. I managed it by showing up on horseback, pretending to be unconscious and delirious, my hand fettered to the saddle horn. We can hardly blame Primotivo for swallowing such bait—"

A look of grudging admiration softened the smoldering anger in Blackjoe Vozar's eyes. His original appraisal of the red-headed Texan had been an underestimate, if anything. Here was a man to match his mettle—

"And why this elaborate trick, Senor?" Vozar inquired.

Eric Lind grinned back at the battery of hostile faces hemming him in, as if enjoying the bleak drama of the moment.

"No one but a smuggler can travel the trails south of the Big Bend of the Rio, Vozar. If I could pass myself off to

you as Jord Starkey, then I could explore this Chihuahua country in comparative safety. It is well known along the Border that you and the real Starkey had never met—and it was hinted that you desired a partnership with him. It seemed worth the risk."

Blackjoe Vozar waggled his head slowly from side to side.

"*Por Dios,* all this I do not comprehend," he protested.

"It is not so mysterious, Vozar. I was seeking Jord Starkey—the man who killed my father. As a member of your *venda,* I would be in a position, sooner or later, to cross Starkey's trail. I did. This is Starkey's *casa.*"

A cruel grin spread Vozar's lips, his eyes shuttling between the Ranger and Alita Bennett. His thumb eared back the knurled hammer of the carbine with an oily click.

"And this *casa* will be your tomb, Senor Ranger!" grated the border-hopper. "And the *damisela* shall die with you. It is not often Blackjoe Vozar can be tricked like a *simplon*—"

Lind felt Alita Bennett stiffen instinctively as she saw Vozar thrust his carbine muzzle against his chest. Before Vozar could pull trigger, Lind played his ace in the hole.

"A moment, Senor. You forget that Matt Lundall is my brother. You forget the gold of Santa Cedilla. Are you ready to make a bargain?"

The pressure of the gun muzzle lessened against Lind's ribs. Vozar's glittering eyes narrowed calculatingly.

"A bargain?" he echoed. "Your *hermano* has told you where this Jesuit treasure is cached, no?"

Lind slid an arm around Alita Bennett's waist and drew her closer to his side.

"We can lead you to the spot where Matt Lundall hid the treasure, Vozar. Getting it will be another thing. Matt and Jord Starkey slipped out of the canyon tonight. They have gone to recover that monastery gold. They will probably put up a fight to keep it."

Vozar's breath came in harsh gusts across his teeth.

"And the bargain you spoke of?" the Spaniard prompted.

Lind inclined his head toward the girl at his side.

"Senorita Bennett's life," he propositioned, "in return for my leading you to the gold of Santa Cedilla. It is what your *capitan* Sebastiano would have called a queen's ransom."

CHAPTER X

Sumadero Showdown

THE sun's first coppery rays were slanting across the crowns of the dwarf cottonwoods lining Amapola Creek when Matt Lundall and Jord Starkey arrived at the creek's junction with the Rio Grande.

Northward across the river loomed the arroyo-gashed badlands of Texas. Just around the curving elbow of the Rio Grande del Norte, the bells of the ancient chapel of the *conquistadores'* mission were summoning the devout of Santa Cedilla village to mass.

The Mexican desert had encroached on the gravelly bed of Amapola Creek, sprawling its tawny sand dunes over the cutbanks and forming dreaded *sumaderos* of crusted quickmire along the water's edge.

Starkey's heart was pumping fast as he dismounted and followed Matt Lundall along the edge of the quicksand bogs which skirted the creek. The treacherous crust, appearing as solid as bedrock, crumpled under their cowboots to reveal the sinister shifting quagmire beneath.

"These *sumaderos* are shallow," Lundall was explaining. "When I dumped my packsaddle, less than three feet of lariat paid out before the packs touched bedrock."

Starkey chuckled, ears cocked to listen to the melody of the Jesuit mission bells, a *matin* lauding the first of the canonical hours of worship. There was a grim irony in the fact that the sacred treasures of the desecrated chapel should be concealed within earshot of the campanile bells. . . .

Scraping his boot through the powdery blowsand, Lundall uncovered a buried coil of pleated rawhide reata. He tugged on the rope until its taut length stood revealed, entering a quicksand *sumadero's* crusty surface at an angle.

"The suction is fierce," Lundall commented. "We'd best dally this rope around a horn and let the horse pull her loose, Starkey."

The red-bearded outlaw stared at the lass'-rope with a morbid fascination as Lundall made it taut around the Brazos horn of his stock saddle and led the rangewise peg pony back onto firm ground above the *sumadero.*

"Take up the slack easy-like!" Starkey warned, as he saw the rope vibrate like a harpstring under the strain. "If she busts we could shovel sand until doomsday and not get anywhere—"

Inch by inch, the heavy pleated reata emerged from the sucking sands. The horse, bunching its steel-calked hoofs in the flinty soil, maintained a constant drag on the rope, as if sensing the disaster which lay in a sudden jerk.

Jord Starkey cursed excitedly as he saw the crust of the *sumadero* heaving from subterranean pressure, then crack open as the Mexican packsaddle tree broke the surface.

A MOMENT later the dripping packbags, stuffed to bursting with Jesuit treasure, slid out on the hard bank with a wet sucking sound as the quicksand yielded its secret.

With trembling hands, Jord Starkey clawed at the slimed-over strap buckles. Then he pried back the flap of the *albarda* and drew forth a glittering, jewel-incrusted crucifix of solid gold, a centuries-old work of art which Matt Lundall had purloined from the Santa Cedilla altar.

"I've got a fence in El Paso who'll pay a young fortune for this piece, Matt!" panted the smuggler. "He'll take these diamonds and rubies out of their settings and melt down the gold. A pity those Jesuit monks couldn't ransom their cross back. . . ."

"We split fifty-fifty, Jord. Wait till you see them candlesticks that Cortez left behind in the 1500's—"

Starkey restored the crucifix to the *albarda* bag and got to his feet. The morning sunrays glinted blindingly off the furbished objects d'art which Matt Lundall, on his knees beside the dripping packsaddles, was pawing out of the leathern bags.

The scrape of a six-gun leaving leather caused Lundall to glance over his shoulder. He found himself staring into the round black bore of his partner's Colt.

Horrified realization blazed in Lundall's eyes as he came to his feet, reading the death-sentence in Starkey's slitted eyes and clamped mouth.

"Starkey — you wouldn't double-cross—"

The red-bearded *contrabandista* laughed as his thumb cocked the six-gun.

"I've always lone-wolfed it, Matt," he reminded the cringing man softly. "There's a curse on this kind of loot. You knew that all along, amigo. . . ."

The Colt bucked and roared in Starkey's fist. Lundall staggered back, spun completely around by the impact of the leaden slug drilling his belly and ripping out through his back. Then his knees unhinged and he collapsed backwards across the packsaddle at the *sumadero's* rim.

For a long moment, Jord Starkey stood staring down at the dying man. Then he ejected the fired cartridge, reloaded and thrust the smoking Colt into holster.

He led Lundall's horse forward and stripped the range saddle from its back. Then he stooped, tugging at the packsaddle and its treasure freight. It was too much for a man to lift. He began unbuckling the supporting straps.

"*Manos altos,* Senor Starkey. Raise your arms and turn around slowly—"

The voice came from the cottonwood bosque at Starkey's back. Frozen in a kneeling posture, the outlaw stared as he saw the long shadow of a sombreroed man fall across the *sumadero* and the loot-laden packsaddle.

Turning slowly, like a puppet on wires, Starkey came to his feet, fingers hooked like talons above his holstered guns.

A tall, flashily-dressed Spaniard was stalking out of the cottonwood brake, a six-gun in either hand. Along all the border there could be but one *contrabandista* who dressed like this avenging gunhawk. . . .

"Blackjoe Vozar! . . . "

Starkey's voice faded in his throat as he looked past the approaching *jefe* of El Pueblo Perdido, to see Ranger Eric Lind following the Spaniard. The Texan was unarmed.

"Lift the hands, Senor—"

The sun was in Starkey's eyes, but desperation was in his heart.

Through no conscious volition of his own, Starkey flung himself to one side and snapped guns from holsters with the smooth, blurring draw that had earned him his gunslick rep from one end of the Rio to the other.

The two men fired in unison, the thunder of their shots rocketing in echo between the cutbanks of Amapola Creek. But it was Blackjoe Vozar who fell backwards before the slamming concussion of converging slugs, meeting between his eyes.

Momentarily, a pitching saddle horse, roped to the loot-freighted saddlebags, came between Starkey and the falling Spaniard. In that instant, Eric Lind leaped to seize the smoking Colts from Vozar's dead hands.

Behind a smudge of drifting gunsmoke, Jord Starkey saw the Texas Ranger weaving toward him, shoulders dropped in a gunman's crouch, six-guns jutting at waist level.

"I'm giving you the chance you didn't give my Dad, Starkey—"

The red-bearded killer jerked trigger as Eric Lind's low-pitched challenge reached him through the haze.

He saw flame spit from the muzzles of the Ranger's guns, felt the jarring shock of hot lead crashing into his chest and shoulder.

With cold precision, Lind emptied both guns, jolting Starkey's reeling body backwards.

Then the smuggler's spurs tripped over Matt Lundall's prostrate body and he fell backwards, fracturing the sandy crust of the quicksand bog.

The greedy mire made gurgling noises as its lethal ooze flowed over the corpse, pulling Starkey into his grisly grave.

Matt Lundall's eyelids fluttered open as the Ranger knelt beside him, clasping the dying man's hands between his own. From afar off, the chiming mission bells reached Matt Lundall's ears, as if tolling requiem.

"When you take . . . the crucifix and stuff back . . . perhaps the priests at Santa Cedilla . . . will burn candles for a sinner's soul, Red?"

Eric Lind nodded, swallowing the ache in his throat.

"Sure. I'm sure they will, Matt. And so will I."

Alita Bennett came out of the cottonwoods then, leading their horses. Back at Starkey's *casa* in the Mexican cordillera, Primotivo and the rest of Vozar's men from Pueblo Perdido would wait in vain for their *jefe's* return. She realized now why Lind had insisted that they ride alone to Amapola Creek—

"Those bells, Red . . . " Matt Lundall's whisper was an expiring echo in his throat. "I'm hopin' . . . it's in the cards . . . for them bells to ring at a weddin'. She's a . . . thoroughbred, Red. Worthy of the best brother . . . a man ever had . . ."

For long minutes after Matt Lundall closed his eyes, Eric Lind squatted there, lost in his own thoughts. The quicksand *sumadero* had obliterated all trace of the man he had trailed so relentlessly in past months.

The touch of Alita's hand on his shoulder jerked the Ranger back to reality. He stood up, looking down into the girl's amber eyes, trying to read the message he saw there.

"The bells—do sound wonderful, don't they?" she asked softly, moving closer to him. "It's almost as if they were ringing for you and me alone to hear—"

She was in his arms, then, her face tipped up to meet his lips.

"I think," the Ranger said, "they are . . ."

A SADDLEMATE FOR SATAN'S DAUGHTER

by JOSEPH WAYNE

JOHN CONWAY was back in the Broken Buttes sitting up with old man Dodson who had come close to dying from typhoid, when a Rafter J hand stopped to say that the stage had gone off the Pass road just below the Lucky Lady mine. There was a time then when Conway forgot to breathe. The chances were good that Jeannie Branca had been on that stage.

"I don't know another damned thing about it, Parson," the cowboy said. "I split the breeze getting here, thinking you'd want to know. If you take the short-cut over Old Baldy, you'll get there afore they're done bringing up the bodies."

"Thanks, Jeff," Conway said, and went out to the barn.

He was saddling up when Mrs. Dodson hurried to him. "You shouldn't go, Mr. Conway. You haven't slept for twenty-four hours and you haven't had your breakfast. If you'll just wait . . ."

"No, I've got to go." Conway tightened the cinch and stepped into the saddle.

Jeff Conway wanted to ride the trail with the girl he loved. The town thought they should choose for him . . . .

"I think Mr. Dodson will be all right. I don't pretend to know why the Lord does what He does, but I do know that a combination of prayer, love, and Doc Meadows is hard to beat."

She reached up to grip his arm. "Mr. Conway, I can't thank you for what you've done. We've had preachers before, but none like you. If you hadn't come to spell me off . . ."

"Don't thank me," Conway said. "I'm sorry I've got to go, but I'll be back."

Conway was not a good rider. He had never been on a horse until he had come to the Warbonnet and he had learned in the year he had been here that he would never be a horseman. He had often envied the cowboys who could stay in the saddle all day and then step down with more agility than he could mount when he hadn't been on a horse for a week. But a horse was the only means of getting around in this country, so he had bought an easy-gaited black gelding the first week he had been here, accepting this means of transportation as he accepted many things that were new to him.

He took the rough trail over the south shoulder of Old Baldy, knowing that it would save him at least ten miles and kept the black at as fast a pace as he could. He was sleepy and tired and hungry, and he wondered how much a human body, even a strong one like his, could stand. At another time he would have smiled, for he had discovered months ago that his body could stand a great deal.

This morning he didn't smile; he couldn't even think coherently. It seemed as if this were a period of hours cut from his life, hours in which he was not living. He would not live until he found out about Jeannie.

Only two days ago he had received her card. She had written, "I'm coming home, Preacher." That was all, yet he had read a great deal more into it. He had made many trips like this since he had come to the Warbonnet; he had given aid to others in any way he could, but this was strictly personal.

HE came down to the river where it roared out of its canyon to become a placid stream curling across a wide valley. A moment later he turned up the narrow road that lay like a kinked ribbon along the cliff until it reached the Pass and dropped over to Baker City on the other side. Within half an hour he came to the wagons and the knot of men huddled on the rim.

The sheriff was the first to see Conway. He said, "Glad you're here, Parson."

Conway stepped stiffly from the saddle. He asked, "How did it happen?"

The sheriff scratched an ear. "Nobody knows. Barney Hogan's been driving this run for twelve years. Drunk or sober, day or night, winter or summer, he could make it down with his eyes shut. Why, you could put a dime on the road a tire width from the rim and he'd make it with maybe half the wheel hanging over the edge, but he wouldn't touch the dime." The sheriff shook his head, staring down at the leaping stream below him. "Well, this time he didn't make it. That's all. Busted the coach from here to hellangone."

"Who was in it?" Conway asked, keeping his voice even.

"Three passengers. That gambler Layton, a tough hand named Pete Gormey, and the Branca girl."

Again, John Conway could not breathe. He had never been one to believe in premonitions, but this had been something of the sort. He had known all the way from Dodson's that Jeannie had been on this stage.

"They're fetching Barney's body now," the sheriff went on. "Busted up pretty bad. The gambler and Gormey were dead, too." The sheriff gave Conway a searching look. "Kind of queer, Parson. You know, if this stage had got in, I'd be a dead man now. I ran Gormey out of Epitaph a month ago and I told him I'd jug him if he ever came back. I got the drop on him then, but this time he'd have got me. He was faster'n me. I ain't fooling myself on that."

The sheriff's words beat against Conway's ears like the distant sound of the

river. Barney's body . . . the gambler . . . Gormey . . . dead. *He hadn't mentioned Jeannie.* Conway gripped the sheriff's arm. "Jeannie?"

The sheriff looked across the canyon to the south rim, frowning as if Conway's interest in Jeannie Branca was a little improper. "She's alive. She's in that first wagon."

Conway brushed past him, hurrying his steps, breath sawing in and out of his lungs. Doc Meadows stood beside the wagon washing the deep cuts on one side of the girl's face. There would be scars, Conway thought, and Jeannie had always been proud of her beauty.

"Howdy, Parson," Meadows said. "Well, Jeannie's alive. I had to go down and put splints on her left leg and arm. It was a tough job getting her up."

Conway said nothing for a time. He stood there fighting for his breath as he looked at the girl's battered face. She was unconscious, her yellow hair spilled over the pillow. A blanket covered her body almost to her chin. A thought struck Conway then. Except for the time he had found Jeannie asleep on his bed, he had never seen her really still. She had always seemed so vibrant and thoroughly alive.

"Will . . . she . . . live?" Conway asked.

Meadows looked at him sharply and went on with his work, not answering for a moment His round, pink-cheeked face was suddenly hard as if, like the sheriff, he considered Conway's interest in the girl improper. Finally, he said, "Depends, Parson."

"On what?"

"Well, she may be bunged up inside. She'll have to have a lot of nursing and I don't reckon anybody in Epitaph will want the job." He scowled. "Damn it, why did she have to come back? She'll stir up trouble like she's always done and she'll make Red Gregg crazy again. Might be better if she don't live."

"You're wrong, Doc," Conway said softly. "As soon as you're done, start her for Epitaph. Take her to my house. She'll get the nursing."

Meadows gave him that sharp look again. "I've lived on the Warbonnet for twenty years, Parson, and I never knew of a Branca doing anything that was good. You know what you're doing?"

"I know," Conway said.

Meadows took a deep breath. "All right."

Conway stood looking at the girl, thinking of the need they had for each other.

DIG up a tough mountain flower that touches a high peak with its beauty and color, transplant it in the valley, water it and tend it and fertilize the soil, and still it will die. Reverse the pattern and the valley plant will die on the mountain.

Those were botanical facts which John Conway was familiar with when he came to Warbonnet, but he told himself he was not a plant; he was a human being with a human being's ability to adjust himself to a new environment. He was warned against the move, for his had been a city life, his church a city church, his people civilized folks who understood him and liked him and welcomed his calls. Still, he had come to the Warbonnet. When asked with some skepticism if God had spoken to him, he said, "I don't know about that. I just know I've got to go."

It was a rough country. There were the few who went to church; there were the many who viewed church-goers as pink-noses who interfered with a man's legitimate fun. Conway learned that from Walt Branca, Jeannie's brother, the first day he was in Epitaph.

Walt was standing in front of the Casino when Conway came down the street. Someone said, "There's the new sky pilot."

Branca grinned at Red Gregg, took a hitch on his belt, and said, "Watch this."

Conway was a big man, a good deal bigger than Walt Branca, but Walt had seen big preachers before. Stepping in front of Conway, he asked, "What gave you the idea we needed a new gospel spieler?"

Conway looked him over, sensing what

was ahead. He said, "Maybe you need one yourself."

Walt laughed. "When they get around to laying me in a pine box and throwing dirt in my face, some damn fool will fetch a preacher who'll say purty things about me. They'll all be lies because nobody can tell the truth about a Branca and say purty things, but I won't be in no shape to deny 'em."

"You may get a chance to deny them in hell."

Walt shrugged. "I sure will deny 'em if I get a chance. I've been having a damned good time. Right now I aim to have a better one. Preachers are great on baptism, so I'll just baptize you in the horse trough."

Walt came in fast, swinging with his right. Conway ducked, moved in under the punch, and hit Walt with a driving fist that knocked him flat. Before he could get to his feet, Conway picked him up and dropped him into the horse trough. He held him there as he turned back to the men in front of the Casino. Red Gregg wasn't grinning, but the girl who had come along the walk from the Mercantile was. She asked, "Is that a baptism?"

"No," Conway said. "Just a bath."

"He could do with one," the girl said, and went on.

Conway stepped back. When Walt sat up and shook his head, spitting water and rubbing it out of his eyes, Conway said, "You want to watch that, friend. You left yourself wide open."

Conway walked on down the street, his eyes on the girl's back. She was wearing a red print dress that was drawn tightly across her hips. She was blonde with more color in her face than most blondes he had known, and he remembered her eyes were very blue, although he was unaware that he had noticed her eyes when he had faced her.

He was not sure whether she knew he was behind her or not, but he suspected she did, for she was walking with quick graceful steps, hips swaying a little, and he was stirred as any man would have been stirred. He thought, with some regret, that it was unlikely he would ever see her in church.

Doc Meadows called on him that night. Meadows was an elder in the church, the one man who was respected by both sides. The sides were definite in Epitaph, as Conway guessed from what had happened that afternoon, and Meadows confirmed that judgment.

"You got off on the right foot," the doctor said. "I'm sorry to say that the preachers we've had just haven't fitted. I'll frankly admit I didn't think you would, coming from Portland, but I was wrong. Anyhow, you're handy with your fists."

Conway smiled. "I've done some boxing." He sobered then. "You see, I've been called a good many names, unorthodox being the politest. The reason is that I have a notion about talents. Like today."

"You mean you believe a man is supposed to use his talents?"

"That's right."

Meadows laughed. "Well, you used one of yours all right. You need to be a little careful, though. The Brancas are a bad lot. The girl who spoke to you is Jeannie Branca, Walt's sister. Their dad is Bill Branca who owns the Bar B out in the Broken Buttes. It was a good outfit once, but Bill doesn't work at it and he'll wind up losing it before the year's out. Walt's a gambler who never worked in his life. And Jeannie." Meadows scowled. "She'll wiggle her hips at any man who'll look twice."

"I guess any man would," Conway said.

"They have," Meadows said. "Take Red Gregg. The fellow Walt was talking to. Red's not bad. Engaged to Laura Wilson and Laura's as fine as they come. If Jeannie would let Red alone, he'd marry Laura and they'd make out fine, but Jeannie counts men like the Indians used to count scalps." Meadows scratched his chin. "You're a single man, Parson. She'll add your scalp if she can."

"Might work the other way."

Meadows shook his head. "Not much it won't. She's bad."

Conway shrugged and let it go, but Meadows had inadvertently hit on an-

other of Conway's pet notions, that there was potential goodness and badness in every person and his job was to develop the goodness.

HE had a chance to work on his theory the first Sunday night he was in Epitaph. He had rented a furnished house a block from the church and had hired a Mrs. Donaldson to run it for him. She cooked supper, attended the service, and went to her own home in the other end of town for the night.

Conway built a fire when he got back from church, made coffee, and went into the front bedroom which he used as a study. He read until midnight, picked up the lamp and went into the back bedroom where he slept. Heeling the door shut, he set the lamp on the bureau. Then he stood as motionless as if he were paralyzed. Jeannie Branca was asleep on the bed.

The shade was down. Conway saw that with vast relief. He touched the girl's shoulder, asking, "Aren't you in the wrong place?"

She came awake at once and smiled at him. "No sir, Preacher. I'm exactly where I planned to be. You just kept me waiting too long."

"I can see that," he said dryly, "but if you want to talk to me, you should knock on the front door."

She sat up and rubbed her face. "You're wrong about that, Preacher." She yawned. "I mean, you're wrong about a Branca. If you let me in, some of the old biddies with the long tongues would talk and your reputation would be ruined. This is better. You can save my soul without anyone knowing about it."

He looked down at her, knowing that what she said was true, but knowing, too, that this was far worse. He said, "It won't do." He was aware that her lips were full and red, that there was a sweet set to them, but whether it was real or assumed for his benefit was a question in his mind.

She started taking her hair down, smiling at him. "A woman should never let a man see her when she's asleep. That is, before they're married. It's so hard to keep pretty when you're asleep. Or do you think I'm pretty?"

"Very pretty," he said. "Now maybe you'd better leave."

She shook her head. "You haven't saved my soul yet."

"I've got a notion about souls," he said. "I doubt that I can save yours tonight."

"Why, it should be easy. Start preaching."

"I don't think preaching saves souls."

She started pinning up her hair. "Well now, that's queer talk for a preacher. What's the rest of your notion?"

"I think a human life, lived as it should be, is the most powerful sermon a man can preach."

She thought about that for a moment. Then she laughed. "You gave Walt quite a sermon. I'm glad you did. He'll let you alone now."

"I think you'd better go."

"All right." She rose. "But don't lock that window. I'll be back." She moved to the window and turned to look at him. "You know that we Brancas are bad."

"No, I don't know that anybody's bad."

She kept looking at him, uncertain. He was never sure he could read a person's face, for he had learned long ago that many people mask their real selves, but it seemed to him there was something fundamentally good about this girl who had been condemned by the community along with her family. She said, "Blow out the lamp." When he had obeyed, she said, "Good night," and slipped out through the window.

She did come back, dangerously often, and usually at unexpected times. Once she woke him up after he had gone to sleep. She wouldn't let him light the lamp, but sat beside the bed with the moonlight falling across her face. There was a sort of elfin appearance about her. He was afraid to reach out and touch her for fear she would disappear.

It was a strange unreal thing. He knew he should stop it, and he knew that a harsh word from him would keep her from coming back. He told himself re-

peatedly that he should, for once it became common knowledge along the Warbonnet that the Branca girl visited him at night, he would be of no more value. And he was becoming of value.

There was little of the hellfire-brimstone preacher about John Conway, but he possessed a rare capacity for comforting those who were sick or in trouble. Townspeople, ranchers, and settlers alike welcomed his visits. All but Bill Branca.

Everywhere that Conway went he heard talk about the Brancas, about Walt who was a gambler and a gunslinger, Jeannie who had a way with men, and the father Bill who was drunk most of the time and who brought women to his ranch from Baker City and took them back when he was tired of them.

Conway did not visit the Bar B that summer, partly because he was sure Bill Branca would not welcome him and partly because he did not want to meet Jeannie under those circumstances. Then, in October, word came that Walt had died in Walla Walla, killed in a gunfight resulting from a quarrel over a poker game. That day Conway rode out to the Bar B.

BILL BRANCA stood on the porch of the big ranchhouse, one hand gripping a post, a tall gray-haired man more drunk than sober.

When Conway was close enough for Branca to recognize him, Branca shouted, "You are not welcome here, Preacher."

Conway reined up. He said in a civil tone, "Ordinarily I would not have come, but I heard about Walt . . ."

Branca threw out a big hand. "He's dead and they'll bury him in Walla Walla and to blazes with him. Nothing you can do."

"I would like to read the Bible . . ."

Branca laughed. "Now wouldn't that be a heck of a thing to do." He shook his head. "Ride off, Preacher."

Conway knew there was nothing he could do. He sat his saddle in his stiff awkward way, looking at the big man, the sickness of failure in him. He realized more fully than he ever had before that no one could be helped who did not want to be helped. As he turned his gelding, Conway thought he saw a curtain stir at an upstairs window.

Jeannie came that night as he had been certain she would. She had been crying. He wondered at it, for she had always seemed so certain of her ability to live within herself. She dropped down on the bed as Conway said, "I should tell you not to grieve over Walt, but I . . ."

She lifted a hand to silence him. "I'm not crying over Walt and I won't. He was bound to go the way he did. I was crying because you came to help us and Dad wouldn't let you. If I hadn't come here that first night I wouldn't have known what you are and what you can do for people." She closed her hands into hard fists, her chin trembling. "I never told you, Preacher, but that first night I came to hurt you."

He had suspected that. Now he waited, saying nothing.

"I had a wild idea us Brancas should stick together. Walt and me anyhow. You'd hurt Walt, so I thought that if I got to coming here through the window someone would see me and talk would start. Well, you know what would have happened. Then I found out that wasn't what I wanted. You're to me like whiskey is to Dad. I couldn't stop coming, but all the time I've been afraid someone would see me." She laughed shakily. "Funny, isn't it?"

"No, it isn't funny." He dropped heavily into a chair. "You see, you're like whiskey to me, too. I've known all the time I should stop you coming, but I couldn't bring myself to do it."

"That's the nicest thing anybody ever said to me." She swallowed, fighting for her self control before she said, "I never told you about myself. I thought you'd hear what people say about me and tell me to stay away, but you didn't. Then after a while I got to thinking you didn't believe the talk."

"It didn't make any difference," he said. "Even if it was true, there was no

reason it had to keep being true."

She drew back against the head of the bed and brought her knees up under her chin. "Would you believe me, Preacher, if I told you that I have never done anything really bad? I mean, I thought it was fun to ride any time of night I wanted to and let men who had bad reputations bring me to dances and, well, encourage men like Red Gregg who had their own women. I thought I might as well give people something to talk about, but I always knew when to make a man stop, John. Can you believe that?"

Conway said, "Yes, I can believe that."

She took a long breath. "You came from a good family, didn't you?"

Conway said, "Yes, I did."

"Then you wouldn't understand about me, would you?"

"I'd like to hear about it. Maybe I would."

"I guess it would do me good to talk. Then I'll go away. I've got to go away. There's nothing here for me but you, and I won't bring you anything but trouble." She took another long breath. "Grandpa, that's Dad's father, came when there were just a few ranchers along the Warbonnet. He was a thief. He didn't make any excuses. Laughed about it because everybody else was afraid of him. He carried two guns and a running iron, and he hired men who were as tough as he was. When he'd been here five years he had the biggest outfit in the Broken Buttes and built the house. All the talk about us started with him. He spoiled Dad just like Dad spoiled Walt, so when he died, Dad wasn't man enough to keep the ranch up."

She hugged her knees tighter, chin dropping down on them. "I don't remember my mother. She died when I was a little girl, but I remember the women Dad brought home and how they were always paddling me whether I did anything wrong or not. They didn't want me around.

She got up, smiling a little. "Funny thing, Preacher. I guess you've saved my soul and you never said a word about it." Then the smile faded, and her face was the hurt face of a child. "Dad never loved me. I was just in his way until I got big enough to keep house. Nobody can help him. He won't let anybody. The bank will take our ranch and he'll drink himself to death or shoot himself."

Conway rose. "Jeannie, I love you." She backed away toward the window. He took a step toward her. "I want you to marry me."

"No. Your people wouldn't let us. Don't you see?"

"Let's try."

She shook her head. "I can't. But I'll always remember that you asked me."

She lifted the shade and jumped out. He ran to the window and recklessly lifted the shade. He heard Red Gregg say, "That damned preacher. So this is why you wouldn't meet me any more."

She slapped him across the face, hard. "It isn't the way you think, Red. I don't love you. I never did. Go marry Laura."

Conway dived through the window as Gregg pulled his gun and threw a wild shot at him. Jeannie was hanging to Gregg's arm. Conway said, "Run, Jeannie."

Gregg said, "So help me, I'll . . ."

Conway hit him, knocking him back into a row of hollyhocks. He jumped on Gregg and pulled the gun out of his hand. "Go on, Jeannie." She fled then. Gregg tried to get up. Conway pushed him back. "Listen, you fool. I have never touched her. Have you any reason to believe she'd let me?"

Sanity came into Gregg's eyes. "No," he admitted. "I tried my damnedest."

"You can ruin me if you want to," Conway said, "but it will make things worse on Jeannie and it won't do you any good. Or you can keep still and marry Laura if you're man enough to keep your word with her. Jeannie's leaving. Why don't you let her go?"

Gregg rubbed his jaw where Conway had hit him. "Yeah. I—I—" He kept on rubbing his chin. "She's like a poison in a man's blood."

"You wouldn't marry her if you could, would you?"

"No, I guess I wouldn't."

"Then get out of here."

He was gone when they came, Doc Meadows and the sheriff and some others. "We heard a shot," the sheriff said. "Figured it came from about here."

"It did," Conway said. "Sounded like it was close, but whoever fired it got away."

They must have believed him, for they let it go at that.

A month later the bank took the Bar B over and Bill Branca shot himself. On Christmas Eve, Conway married Laura Wilson and Red Gregg.

DOC MEADOWS brought Jeannie to Conway's house. Mrs. Donaldson took her turn at nursing her, Conway took a shift, and Mrs. Meadows gave a hand. Jeannie got well, although her leg still would not hold her weight, and Doc Meadows called it a miracle.

"No," Conway said. "No miracle. It was a combination of prayer, love and you."

Meadows lifted an eyebrow. "Love?"

"Yes. I love her."

"Well, I'll be damned," Meadows said. "So she did get your scalp."

"I told you it might work the other way."

Meadows grabbed his black bag and stalked out. That night Conway carried Jeannie from the bed to the divan in the front room. He put her down and pulled a blanket over her. He said, "We'll have company. You've got to back me up."

"I will." She smiled wryly and lifted a hand to the scarred side of her face. "You can always look at the other side, John."

"Either side's beautiful to me," he told her. "I'll never forget you got that coming back to me."

She looked at him, biting her lower lip. "John, I wish I understood why things are the way they are. I was the only one who lived."

"No use worrying about the why of things. I've got a notion about it, though. It's what a person makes out of the years they still have ahead of them that counts."

He heard the knock on the door and he let them in, Doc Meadows and the sheriff and some others.

"Come in," Conway said. When they were inside, he shut the door and walked back to the divan. "I assume you've come to ask how Jeannie is?"

"No," Meadows said. "We've come to get Jeannie to change her mind about marrying you. If she knows what it will do to you . . ."

"For a good man, Doc," Conway said, "you're something of a fool. I'm going to ask her to marry me, and if you do anything to make her say no, I'll never forgive you."

"But damn it," Meadows exploded, "you're a big part of this community. We need you. You can't let yourself be handicapped by a woman . . ."

Conway held up his hand. "Doc, you're an old woman for helping the gossip along. Sometime I'll preach about the man who could throw the first stone. Could you, Doc?"

Meadows lowered his head. They shuffled about uneasily, the ones who had come along for the show acting as if they wished they hadn't come. Conway laughed softly. "I see the sermon won't be necessary." He took Jeannie's hand and looked down at her. "Jeannie, will you marry me?"

"Yes," she said simply.

He turned to the others. "Wait for five years. If you don't say that Jeannie is the best preacher's wife you ever saw, we'll leave the Warbonnet. If you won't wait, I guess we'll have to go somewhere else. There are other places where we can work."

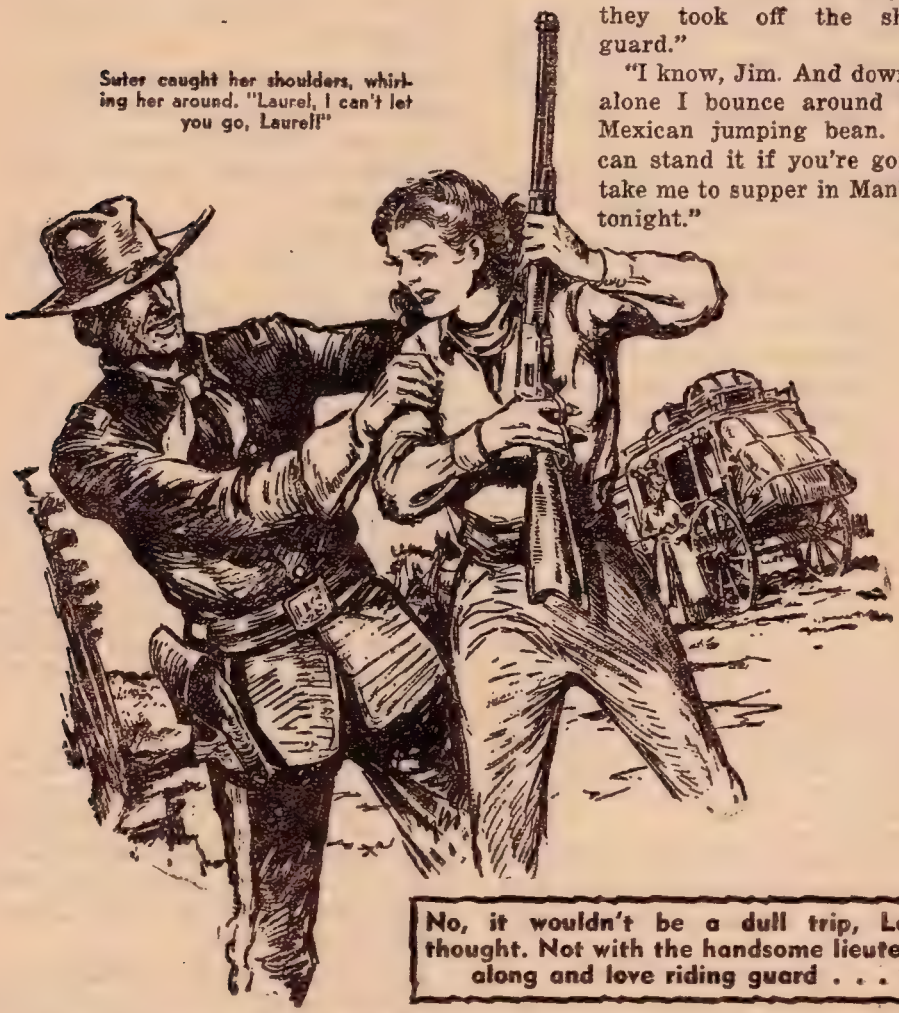
Meadows cleared his throat. "We'll wait fifty years, Parson, if that's the way you want it."

Conway opened the door for them. He called, "Good night," as they went out. Then he returned to the divan and taking Jeannie into his arms, kissed her. It was the first time he had kissed her. He had wanted to for a long time, but now he was not sorry he had waited.

ANGEL with a SIX-GUN

by

ROE RICHMOND



Suter caught her shoulders, whirling her around. "Laurel, I can't let you go, Laurel!"

No, it wouldn't be a dull trip, Laurel thought. Not with the handsome lieutenant along and love riding guard . . . .

THE westbound stage was about ready to roll from Hollis, and big Jim Traynor, the driver, stood by the coach and smiled shyly at the lone girl inside. "It looks like we travel alone some more, Laurel," he said in a slow soft voice.

Laurel Gray nodded her bright chestnut head. "I wish I could ride on top with you, Jim."

"I'd sure like your company, Laurel, but that's one of the rules I don't break. Lonesome up there too, since they took off the shotgun guard."

"I know, Jim. And down here alone I bounce around like a Mexican jumping bean. But I can stand it if you're going to take me to supper in Manhasset tonight."

Jim Traynor grinned. "That's one of the rules I *do* break!" He turned away to start climbing to the high seat when a shout from across the street halted him, a gay clear cry:

"Hold up, driver, for the U.S. Cavalry!"

A slim young man in an immaculate

blue uniform crossed the sunlit dust with an easy swagger, seemingly unburdened by the luggage and carbine he carried, his campaign hat tilted to a rakish and unmilitary angle. As he drew closer, Laurel saw that he was a lieutenant, darkly handsome with a thin fine-featured brown face, fiery black eyes, and a flashing smile in under the trim mustache. There was an intense vital look about him, the girl discerned. His stubborn chin was cleft and his lean cheek showed another dimple. In spite of her usual detachment Laurel Gray felt a warm rush of interest, which was obviously returned by the officer's frank stare.

"You travelin', soldier?" Jim Traynor drawled.

The lieutenant nodded. "Much as I dislike being horse-drawn it is a necessity." He glanced again at Laurel. "That may develop into a pleasure. All the way to Elkhorn—I hope." Retaining his rifle he heaved the rest of his gear to the top of the coach.

Jim Traynor grinned at the girl. "We got company, Laurel."

"The best in the West," the young officer assured them. "The miles will go like music with Lieutenant Allan Suter aboard."

Jim nodded at the Spencer carbine. "You plannin' to ride shotgun?"

"Later perhaps," Suter said. "But my first duty is to gladden the heart of our fair, lonely passenger." With a gallant bow he opened the door and got in beside Laurel on the back seat, placing the carbine on the opposite seat, unbuckling his gun-belt and slinging that alongside of the rifle, settling back with a sigh of pleasure.

On top, arranging and strapping down the baggage, Jim Traynor smiled in anticipation of the surprise that cocky young man was liable to get when he tried to charm Laurel Gray, daughter of Old Gil Gray who owned the Diamond-G, largest spread in the whole Elkhorn country. . . . Mounting the seat then, Jim took the reins from the hostler, kicked off the brake, raised his voice to the six horses and cracked his long whip to set them in motion.

BELOW in the Concord, Laurel had instantly decided that this young officer was altogether too fresh and smart, and for several miles all she showed him was a deaf ear and a strong, cold profile. Tired out from his own persistent efforts to open a conversation, Allan Suter finally subsided into semi-silence, contenting himself with a bold steady appraisal of her face and figure.

There was plenty to look at all right, he decided. Laurel had a wealth of chestnut hair under the snug new marrio, and the long white traveling cloak could not fully conceal the rich ripe lines of her lissome body. She was handsome rather than pretty, her eyes gray, clear and wide, the nose straight and fine, her mouth wide, firm and serene. Her chin was strong to balance the broad brow, the line of her throat was pure and lovely.

"You're from the East," Allan Suter said. "Those clothes look like New York and nowhere else."

By this time Laurel was weary of maintaining silence. "Chicago," she corrected. "I've been visiting there, but Elkhorn's my home. I can't wait to get back there and into range clothes again."

The lieutenant registered surprise. "I would have sworn you were from New York. There is something—"

"I don't consider that a compliment," she said coldly.

"Perhaps not to yourself but certainly to your clothing," he said suavely.

Laurel shrugged without answering, inwardly smiling at his cleverness. Allan Suter went on to tell her about his last furlough back East, balls in Philadelphia, revelry in Manhattan, a trip with classmates up the Hudson to West Point. His voice was cultured and pleasant, he had a nice sense of humor, and his laugh was so contagious that Laurel caught it despite herself. Before long the barriers were down and they were chatting and laughing in easy companionship. Allan Suter had more charm than any man Laurel had known.

Outside, the arid sunburnt miles rolled past unheeded, and the blazing afternoon heat was more bearable to the girl in Suter's company. When they stopped at a waterhole and got out to stretch, Jim Traynor noticed with a frown that his two passengers had become very close, almost intimate. While they both endeavored to be pleasant to him, Jim observed that their eyes soon merged again, and he might as well have been one of the horses. Having a civilian's distrust of the uniform, along with a deep honest regard for Old Gil Gray's daughter, Jim Traynor was worried. . . . But there didn't seem to be anything he could do about it.

The afternoon burned itself away, the sun sank in flames behind the western peaks, and twilight came like a benediction over miles of red-brown earth, plum-colored mesquite and purple sage. The lights of Manhasset glimmered ahead in the dust, and Jim Traynor knew there would be no supper with Laurel for him this evening. With an overnight stop here Lieutenant Suter would have more than enough time to exercise his wiles on Gil Gray's daughter. Jim determined to keep an unobtrusive eye on proceedings, at any rate, and if necessary he'd be more than glad to step in and slap some sense into that be-mustached popinjay of a cavalryman.

Laurel Gray, meanwhile, learned that, in spite of his youth and elegance, Allan Suter was a veteran who had fought Indians from the Querhada to the Paradise. He told it simply, without boasting, and Laurel was convinced that he must be a fine soldier and officer. . . . She could see him riding at the head of his company, gay, fearless, indomitable, teeth flashing white in his lean, powder-blackened face, saber shining in his hand.

THEY creaked to a halt in the murky, flare-splashed street of Manhasset, and Suter handed her from the coach. Jim Traynor tossed down the necessary luggage and descended to stand beside them, a broad solid man with a square rugged face, brutal jaw, and the mildest of blue eyes.

"Jim," Laurel said. "You don't mind if I . . ."

"Not at all, Laurel," he said. "You go ahead and have a good time. I've got some folks to look up here anyway. Maybe see you around later."

"Do that," said Allan Suter. "I'd like to stand you a few drinks. That was the best stage ride I ever had."

Traynor considered him gravely. "Glad you liked it, soldier. Take good care of the little girl. She's thought a whole lot of in the Elkhorn."

"And everywhere else, I assure you," Suter said calmly.

They got rooms in the hotel and Suter carried her valise upstairs and inspected her room to see that it was satisfactory. When they parted at the doorway, the corridor dim and empty outside, Suter swept her suddenly and unresistingly into his arms. Laurel lifted her mouth to his, her arms crept around him, and they clung there for a breathless timeless interval. She had never known such an exalted feeling. When he let her go she was quivering like a taut wire, her blood a torrent, her brain reeling with rapture. Closing the door, she fell across the bed, murmuring to herself, half-swooning.

Love, Laurel Gray thought. This must be it, it can't be anything else. . . . She realized for the first time how empty one part of her busy life had always been. The only men in it her father, brothers, and the Diamond-G riders, who were either like uncles or brothers, depending on their age. And now Allan Suter . . . Lieutenant Allan Suter. Over and over she repeated his name, and there was magic in it.

Allan had ordered their dinner served in a private dining room at the Oriental, and they wined and dined on the best that Manhasset offered. The lieutenant did things in the grand manner, making Laurel feel like a queen in the candle-lit room. . . . Afterward they danced, such a handsome couple that people turned to watch them, and Allan Suter was the perfect partner, skilled, sure and graceful. Laurel, who had never been

as much at home on the dance floor as in the saddle, felt light as a feather tonight. She had never been so happy in her life.

And then Allan Suter stiffened suddenly in his place across the table, his dark eyes burning intensely at someone on the other side of the room. Turning slightly Laurel saw at once the object of his ardent stare: a sleek golden-haired girl in a severely smart black gown, her head poised proud and high, her delicately carved face bored and superior. Something about this polished creature made Laurel feel coarse and crude, like a cowgirl dressed up for Saturday night.

"Excuse me, Laurel," Allan Suter said. "Someone I know. . . . He rose quickly with a brief nod and moved easily across the floor, a slender dashing figure in his tailored uniform, blue with yellow stripes down the trousers. Laurel saw the haughty face relax and light up with a smile of recognition, saw Suter kiss her hand and bend his gleaming black head close to the blonde one. . . . A few minutes later he returned with the girl on his arm, presenting her as Pamela Fuller of Boston, an old friend.

"Yes, Allan used to take me to dances at the Point," Pamela Fuller said. "Frightfully dull things they were too, except for the glamor of the uniforms."

"What a wonderful coincidence," said Allan Suter. "Pam's taking the stage to Elkhorn with us tomorrow, Laurel."

"That's fine," Laurel murmured, trying vainly to inject some enthusiasm into her dull tone.

"There's some talk of the Apaches having escaped the reservation," Pamela Fuller said. "But no one seems to take it very seriously."

"Don't you believe a word of it," laughed Suter. "I put them down to stay some time ago!"

AFTER that, although Pamela was condescendingly courteous and Suter scrupulously polite, Laurel Gray might as well have been at home sitting on a corral rail. After seeing them dance together she declined to take the floor again, and after watching them spin superbly through several numbers, Laurel had all she could endure. Waiting till they were lost in a remote corner, she left the table and fled for the door, restraining her tears until she was outside. Then the hot rush of them blinded her as she hastened toward the hotel, wanting only to get out of sight and hide alone with her humiliation and bitterness.

I was all right until she came along, she thought. I was good enough to pass the time and the miles with until he found one of his own class. It was just an act, a game for him, and everything he said and did was a lie. . . . They're probably laughing together now about the ranch girl from Elkhorn. Well, let them laugh, I'm just glad I found out about Lieutenant Allan Suter in time. This hurts but it could have been worse, a lot worse. . . . You can have your gilded doll, Allan, and Pamela, you can have the pretty soldier boy . . . All I want is to get home to the Diamond-G.

She ran across the street, dodging a buckboard and a couple of riders, the lights blurred dazzlingly in her wet eyes, her breath coming in long sobs. . . . Near the hotel a big man stepped out of a group into her path, leering: "What's the stampede for, sister? Simmer down a mite and we'll—" She lashed out at him as he reached for her. The man laughed and made another grab.

Then Jim Traynor was there, catching her briefly in his arms, patting her shoulder and pushing her behind him, striding toward the big man who had tried to stop her. Jim Traynor, square and solid as a great rock between her and danger.

"Don't be doin' that," Jim advised quietly, eyeing the big man, standing easily with his hands half-raised and spread.

"And why not?" The big man bunched his fists and thrust out his chin.

"Just this," Jim said, and struck with sudden savage speed and power. The man's head rocked, his knees jacked, and he dropped to the slat sidewalk as if shot through the brain. Jim looked at

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we may have some fun before this trip's over."

"The lieutenant's having his fun already," Laurel smiled. "Playing nursemaid to the belle of Boston."

Jim grinned. "He don't look so bright and happy as he did this mornin', that's a fact."

"There ain't enough Apaches out to hit a stage," Pitts said. " 'Specially if they know me and Jim's teamin' it! Don't you worry none, Miss Laurel."

"I'm not worried," Laurel said. "I almost wish a few of them would come along. I'd like to show the lieutenant the difference between a girl from Boston and a girl from the Elkhorn."

"Reckon you've done that already, Laurel," drawled Jim Traynor, observing how Suter's dark gaze kept straying from his partner toward Laurel Gray.

And Laurel, studying Jim's square craggy face, grim but generous mouth, and mild steady blue eyes, the easy set of his fine, tawny-brown head, realized that a man like Jim Traynor made Suter seem like a flippant callow no-account boy, charming enough but shallow and insincere.

THEY drove on into the furnace-heat of the afternoon, scourged by blistering breezes, drenched with alkali dust, sweating, panting and miserable in the swaying coach. Pamela Fuller, wilting all the forenoon, actually seemed to shrivel and disintegrate now as she sobbed and whined on Suter's shoulder. The lieutenant, nerves and patience fretted raw, turned in desperate appeal to Laurel Gray but found little comfort in her cool, mocking smile.

"It's a hard country," Laurel remarked lightly.

"A disgrace to the United States," moaned Pamela. "Fit for nothing but savages and animals."

"Snakes and lizards," suggested Laurel.

"And people like you!" Pamela Fuller blurted angrily. "Water, Allan, I must have some more water."

With a tortured look on his thin dark face Allan Suter reached for the canteen.

Late in the afternoon Laurel saw an ominous yellow dust cloud unfurling to the south, and knew that it was made by a small column of fast-riding horsemen. Jim and Pitts had probably seen it long ago and knew what it meant. When Suter's dark eyes spotted it they narrowed with instant comprehension, and he motioned unnecessarily for Laurel to keep her silence. The cloud was moving in their direction. Estimating angles and distances Laurel decided it would be a very close thing.

"We'll get to Matthews' in about an hour," she said.

Allan Suter nodded, his lips compressed. At the rate it was coming that dustcloud would get to them in approximately half that time. Well, if there weren't too many Apaches it might not be too bad. Nobody could drive better than Jim or shoot straighter than Wylie Pitts, that was one consolation.

Jim Traynor had the horses racing now in an effort to keep ahead of the Indians, make them come up from behind, and the coach was fairly rocketing along the red-dirt road, bouncing, jolting and careening crazily as Jim made his bullwhip sing and snap. . . . Pamela protested against this excess speed and ordered Suter to have the driver slow down at once, but at this point the lieutenant was playing deaf.

Fascinated, Laurel Gray watched that saffron plume swirl closer and closer, until individual ponies and riders could be seen through the veiling dust. There were fifteen or twenty of them, she judged, enough to make plenty of trouble but not enough to overwhelm the stage unless they intercepted and surrounded it. If the warriors had to come up from behind, the coach had a chance. And they were going to have to, Jim was already west of them and running the horses hard.

Pamela Fuller, finally noticing Suter's concentration to his left as he stared southward, leaned forward to take a look herself and screamed in utter horror. Allan Suter tried to calm and soothe her,

but she went on screaming hysterically until she fainted dead away. Suter sighed in relief and Laurel echoed it.

"Give me your Colt," Laurel said simply. "And get ready with that carbine."

Allan Suter handed her the revolver and some extra shells, his dark eyes filled with admiration and respect. The Indians were out of sight momentarily, swinging into the road in back of the stage, but they would be coming up fast. Suter moved to the front seat and held the Spencer ready at the right-hand door. Laurel crouched in the left corner gripping the six-shooter. From the top Wylie Pitts' shotgun thundered twice, and Laurel could visualize his toothless tobacco-stained grin and jutting jaw. That meant two less braves unless Pitts had slipped a lot, and he'd be unlimbering his rifle now.

Arrows thudded into the rear end of the coach and bullets ripped through with a spray of splinters. Pamela Fuller was mercifully unconscious on the floor, the safest possible place. . . . The Apaches came up on either side, half-naked, hideous with paint, hanging low behind the bodies of their horses. Allan Suter opened up with his carbine. Laurel Gray cocked and aimed the big .44 with a firm practiced hand, triggered and saw a brown body fly clear as the pony cartwheeled in a shower of sand.

Bullets were slashing and screeching through the coach as Laurel fired and dropped her second horseman into the billowing dirt. At the other door Allan Suter was working the Spencer as calmly and steadily as if on the practice range, making every .50 caliber slug count. From the topside little Wylie Pitts' Remington was reaping its terrible toll, and Jim Traynor twisted occasionally to throw a shot from his six-gun.

THE APACHES who were left alive and on horseback faded into the background now, and the seared plain was dotted with the bodies of ponies and bucks. Several of the redmen, their mounts killed in under them, howled their futile wrath after the racing stage-coach. . . . The stockade wall of Matthews' place loomed ahead, and somebody was already opening the gate. Laurel noticed with surprise that the sun was setting blood-red behind the western ramparts, and she knew then that it was all over and they were safe.

"We're in, Laurel," smiled Allan Suter. "They won't come back tonight. . . . You were wonderful!"

He moved close as if to wrap his arms about her, but Laurel shook her chestnut head and held one hand against his damp-shirted chest, feeling suddenly very wise and mature, calm and controlled.

"Last night Pamela was wonderful and I washed out, Allan," she said quietly. "Today you say I'm wonderful and she's out of the picture. . . . It's just a matter of environment, the difference between East and West."

"No, it's more than that, deeper than that," Suter insisted. "I was a fool last night, Laurel. I tried to wake you and tell you. . . . You're the only girl in the world for me. The only one I ever wanted to marry."

Laurel Gray smiled gently. "That sounds nice, Allan—but you don't mean it. Pamela's more your kind of girl, and you know it."

Allan Suter sighed, lifted Pamela from the floor and placed her on the seat. She did not come to. Suter turned from her and bowed his black head into his hands, as the stage ground and creaked to a stop within the walls of Matthews' compound.

Laurel opened the door and swung lightly and thankfully to the ground. Suter sprang out in back of her, catching her shoulders and whirling her around. "Laurel, I can't let you go, Laurel! . . ."

"I'm afraid you'll have to, Allan," she said, and pointed into the coach. "Pamela needs your help now. Remember you're an officer and a gentleman."

With a little inarticulate cry Suter grasped her and tried to draw her into an embrace. At that moment Jim Traynor landed beside them, one great hand on the lieutenant's slim shoulder. Suter

looked up, his dark eyes furious, but they soon cooled under the mild blue stare of Jim Traynor and Jim jerked his thumb at the coach.

"You'd better take care of the lady from Boston, soldier," Jim told him gravely. "Out here in the Elkhorn we kinda look out for our own."

Without a word, or another glance at Laurel, Lieutenant Allan Suter clambered back inside to administer first aid to Pamela Fuller. She was conscious now and needed only a manly shoulder to weep on.

Jim Traynor was scanning Laurel's powder-streaked face, thinking that she looked sweeter and lovelier than ever. He said: "I'm sure glad you're all right, Laurel, I was some worried. . . . That was mighty nice shootin', little girl."

"I didn't do much," Laurel said. "Lieutenant Suter did his share all right. But I guess Wylie Pitts was the boy."

Wylie spat disgustedly. "Wasted two or three shells, Miss Laurel. Have to use nothin' but a scattergun if I keep on goin' downhill like this."

Laurel and Jim Traynor laughed together, their shoulders rubbing, and all at once it was as if an electric shock galvanized them into sudden and simultaneous action. At any rate, they were swiftly enfolded in one another's arms and the barren twilight yard became a bower of shimmering beauty as their lips met, crushed and clung.

"I—I'm sorry, Laurel," Jim Traynor mumbled, awed and shaken as he partly released her, shaking his sandy head.

"Sorry?" Laurel cried softly, laughing a little tremulously. "Well, just for that you'll have to do it again, Jim!"

Jim grinned and did so without loss of time.

Wylie Pitts saw that a similar scene was being enacted inside the coach. He spat a stream of tobacco juice, shook his head sadly, and said: "Injuns sure has a powerful effect on some people, I reckon. Me, they only give me a natural healthy thirst . . ." He turned with a toothless grin to ask Matthews if he had a bottle stashed anywhere around the place.

Laurel, thrilled to the core as she was, had a deep shining sense of security, safety and well-being in Jim Traynor's arms. This was the way it should be, the real thing, and yesterday had been merely experimental. . . . She was home before she ever reached the Diamond-G, and it was a homecoming to remember the rest of her life.

LADY BANDIT by Brent Grayson

(A True Love Story)

THE year was 1899, the place, Cove Spring Canyon, Arizona. The stage from Benson, rattling down the dusty road didn't have a shotgun guard. Riders of the dark trails had for a decade or so become merely legends. So, neither the passengers nor the driver thought much of it when the two horsemen appeared at the side of the road. That is, one was a man, the other a slim-looking boy, unshaven face spotting him as a kid. But when the first warning shots were fired, the stage screeched to a halt.

The "kid" was diminutive Pearl Hart, and this stagecoach holdup was the culmination of a career that was to set her down in the annals of western history.

Strangely enough, Pearl didn't come from the West, but was born in Lindsay, Ontario. She was just a slip of a girl with an indomitable and fearless spirit, and adventure was a racing need in her blood. Pearl Taylor led a pretty sheltered life until she met a handsome, dashing, man-about-town by the name of Hart. It was love from the start, and when he asked her to marry him, Pearl gasped breathlessly, "Oh, yes, darling, yes!"

Pearl and her lover eloped to the United States where they traveled around the country, but it soon turned out that Hart wasn't quite as exciting as a husband. He managed to support her for a while working as a bartender and gambler whenever he could. But more often than not, he just took it easy.

It was at the Fair in Chicago, where Hart was working as a barker that Pearl first heard about the West. She wandered around all day, looking at the exhibits that depicted the wild and woolly badmen, and she determined that some day she would see for herself. The opportunity came sooner than she expected for Hart up and deserted her. *(Continued on page 94)*

SNARE OF THE SALTGRASS SIREN

by MEL HOLT

CHAPTER I

The Hunted and the Hunters

WEARIED by three days' ride from Amarillo in the Texas Panhandle, Glenn Anders rode into the Pecos valley that evening and made camp at the foot of Comanche Hill, while overhead the New Mexican sky grew dark with the threat of a storm. Glenn was finishing his meal when something caused the brush to rattle in the draw behind him. He straightened his lean height beside the campfire and turned, hand sliding to the butt of the Colt holstered at his hip. Then he stiffened.

"No Anders, no!" he screamed. "I can't swim!"

NOVELET OF A RANGEWISE TROUBLE QUEEN!

He was staring into the face of a girl who stood panting at the mouth of the draw. It was a small, tanned face with a hint of pertness about the short nose and the dimpled, now quivering chin. Her abundance of dark wavy hair was damp and disheveled. Glenn frowned with puzzlement at the look of fear in her wide black eyes and in the way her lips were parted to reveal white teeth.

She came toward him uncertainly. The movement of her short, compact figure drew Glenn's gray eyes away from her face. Her studded Levis and frayed blue

She was in a honey of a tight, and Glenn Anders knew he couldn't leave anyone that cuddly to make her stand alone!

shirt were thoroughly water-soaked, and clung to the contours of her body. He realized then that she was no mere girl. There was maturity in the fullness at her breast and hips.

She blushed under his stare, and the quick lowering of his gaze to the ground in front of her was his apology. "Step to the fire and dry out," he said.

"I—I swam the river," she stammered. Her voice was surprisingly husky. "I'm lost, I guess."

Glenn put sowbelly and hardtack into a tin plate and refilled the coffee cup. "Hungry?" he said, and set the grub on the ground before her.

She knelt and began eating, swallowing the food fast, her black eyes studying him intently. Once her gaze moved aside for a quick swing up the draw behind him. He got the impression that she was in a desperate hurry but was gambling on the time it took to size him up and reach some decision.

Finally, he said, "I'm a stranger here. Name's Glenn Anders."

That nameless fear focused sharply in her eyes again before she could mask the reaction. Somewhere, then, she had heard of him. Glenn wondered at that.

"What's the matter with it?" he said in a quiet, chiding way. "Haven't you heard there's nothing in a name. I didn't get yours."

"Charlie . . ." Her voice trailed off cautiously.

"Charlie?" He savored it, a grin touching his dark, flat-cheeked face. "See what I mean? Nothing in a name."

"Pa wanted a boy. And I guess maybe he was bitter when my mother died bringing me into this forsaken place."

His grin faded. "I'm sorry."

She straightened abruptly. She said in a pleading voice, the words coming swiftly, "Look, you're my last hope now and I've got to trust you. I think they'll be here in a few minutes. Please, you've got to help me—"

She stood close to him, upturned face hardly reaching to his shoulders. For the first time he noticed the dark stain on her shirt, in back of the shoulder. He knew instantly that it was blood, once dried and now remoistened by her dip in the Pecos. Laying his hand gingerly on the frayed cloth, he could feel the swollen welt on her flesh underneath.

"What caused that?" His guttural query was edged with latent anger.

"A quirt," she said, and Glen saw a tremor run through her body.

The elements turned loose then, precluding any further explanation from her. The cold breath of air which struck them was the very last warning. In the next instant the rain started—a sudden, wind-lashed downpour which beat at them with all the savagery of a Panhandle sandstorm.

Glenn spun around and pawed the long slicker frantically out of his bedroll. He threw his saddle atop the bedroll, and hitched his sorrel to a cedar sapling to keep the horse from drifting. He grabbed the girl's arm and they fled into the draw, stumbling and gasping from the effort of bucking the squall's fury. They crouched together in the brush, Glenn drawing the big slicker over their heads, she helping to tug it around them and hold it tightly to prevent the wind from tearing it away.

THE hollow drumming of rain against the slicker drowned the sound of their hard breathing, but Glenn could feel the heaving of Charlie's bosom against his ribs, for she was twisted against him in a frightened way. He slid his free arm around her shoulders. This was a new and strange experience which branded its impression deeply on his senses. He found it difficult to keep his thoughts on the storm.

He was almost sorry when the rain and wind subsided, ten minutes later. Without trying to evaluate that feeling just then, he drew the slicker from about them. Charlie moved away from him a little, and their eyes met. With an oblique sheepishness at first. Then squarely, with some mutual, indefinable understanding.

The sound of hoofbeats came faintly up the draw. The girl froze. "They're coming," she said tautly. "Will you help me?"

There was little time. Glenn led her quickly to where his gear was piled. At his bidding she lay on the ground and doubled up, knees under her chin. He started piling his sodden bedding over her.

"Till now I've always looked in a horse's mouth before I bought it," he said, forcing a sternness into his voice. "I'll play along till I learn the setup. If I don't like it—"

After he had dropped the blankets over her head to hide her from view, her look of gratitude stayed with him. He placed his big stock saddle over the bedding as he had done when the rain started. While the rataplan of soggy hoofbeats drew dangerously near, he blotted her sign by treading meticulously on each of her small footprints, until only the large tracks of his own boots were visible in the mud.

Three horsemen came into sight in the draw. If they had been following Charlie's sign, they were searching blindly now, for the rain had wiped out her trail leading to Glenn's camp.

One of the first things he noticed about the men was the brand on their horses. Matt Kinnard's iron, the Leaning K. Inwardly it startled him. A week ago Kinnard's letter had reached him at Amarillo. According to the letter, Kinnard had heard of Glenn's reputation with a gun and wanted to hire him. A range war was in the making here in the valley of the Pecos; Kinnard owned a sizable spread and wanted to protect his interests.

Glenn was a trifle dubious about the job. But a man got into the habit of eating and hated to quit it. Bred to the cattle range, Glenn had followed an orphan's existence until that deputy sheriffing job beckoned at Amarillo. The job had lasted six years, terminating recently when Glenn's superior had been voted out of office. Glenn thought he might have stayed a cowpuncher if permitted to play his cards again.

The Leaning K riders reined up in front of him. They had been caught in the storm; their garb was soaked and they looked short of temper. Two of them halted a little behind the big, keg-bellied man with the long red hair and red beard which were curly with dampness. Glenn knew he was looking at the man who wanted to hire him.

Matt Kinnard's flimsy shirt was plastered wetly to his prodigious shoulders and opened halfway down the front to expose more of that red hair. Below that, his keg belly kept trying to burst the waistband of a grime-streaked pair of duck pants. On his thick right hip, the Remington .44 looked like a small plaything.

The old man's red-rimmed eyes peered at Glenn from under the soggy brim of a rusty-black hat. More than the size of him or anything else, it was his eyes which made a man feel uncomfortable. Their greenish hue reminded Glenn of potholes rank with a floating moss-sludge which hid the things lying in their depths.

"Stranger hereabouts, ain't you?" he asked Glenn. His voice held a harshness like the ripping of cloth. "Got business in the valley?"

"Maybe," Glenn said.

"What business?"

"Is it any of yours?" Glenn asked quietly.

Kinnard's blunt face reddened a little. One of the other riders nudged his mount forward a few steps, speared Glenn with a hard stare and said brashly, "When he asks a question, mister, he's used to getting a straight answer."

"Shut up, Lash," Matt Kinnard snapped. "I'm talking to him."

The burly man called Lash was near Glenn's own age of twenty-five, and obviously laboring under the curse of being Matt Kinnard's son. Lash's predilection for fancy, expensive garb, and the fact that he was clean-shaven except for a small red mustache, showed that he was fighting the curse. He had a strong face which women might have considered handsome, but the arrogance written there now spoiled the effect. He wore a Bisley Model pistol, and a quirt dangled by a thong from his wrist. Glenn stared at the quirt, his body tingling with the

remembrance of a welt on a soft feminine shoulder.

"Look here," he said. "What was it you wanted with me?"

"We was wondering," said Matt, "if you'd seen anything of a girl."

Glenn in turn was wondering whether she was Matt's daughter. Or perhaps his niece. Both possibilities seemed incongruous.

He summoned a laugh. "A girl? Out here by herself? You're not stringing me along, are you? Maybe I'm interested. How old is she? She branded, or still a maverick?"

Lash swore and leaned out from his saddle. He swung the quirt in a vicious, whistling arc, designed to cut Glenn's face to bloody ribbons. Glenn saw it coming and sidestepped. He grabbed the quirt above its splayed rawhide lashes, its stock thudding into his palm with stinging impact as his fingers closed around it tightly.

Lash was off balance, and with the stock of the quirt anchored to his wrist by the encircling thong, Glenn's unexpected tug on it unhorsed him completely. He landed heavily in the mud, the horse skewing away from him. Glenn's second jerk on the quirt pulled the man's arm out straight from his body. Glenn put the instep of his boot on the thick wrist and and pushed it down hard in the mud, pinning Lash's arm.

Glenn straightened, increasing the pressure of his foot, right hand shucking his gun in a flowing movement, just as Lash's horse moved from in front of Matt and the man beyond him. That third man had his gun partially drawn when he saw Glenn's leveled Colt.

"Go ahead," Glenn said flatly. "Go ahead and pull it."

CHAPTER II

Satan's Spread

FOR what seemed a long time, the man sat there in a ludicruously suspended animation. He was lean and cadaverous, his thin face drawn with a look of dread amazement which caused the smallpox scars there to grow livid.

Unaccountably, Matt Kinnard's hands still rested on his saddlehorn. His eyes held a fascinated gleam now as they probed Glenn's face in that assiduous, discomforting way. Suddenly, a chuckle shook his prodigious shoulders.

"Better let go of your gun, Socorro," he said without looking around. "Better just forget it."

When the man called Socorro had followed Matt's suggestion, Glenn stepped back away from Lash. He kept the Colt at a steady level while he stared at Matt, trying to fathom the gross old man's behavior.

"Let this be a lesson, Lash," Matt said harshly. "I told you to stay out of it, didn't I? Now get up and climb in your kack. And don't try nothing else, or I think this hombre just might kill you."

Lash got back on his horse, holding his wrist and swearing under his breath.

Matt's grin reappeared. "You got that cutter out fast just now," he said to Glenn. "Want a job?"

"Got one," said Glenn.

Matt's red brows lifted. "McQuinn's outfit?"

"Who's McQuinn?"

"You're a close one, ain't you? I got no time to dicker now, but I'll double what he's offered you. If you want to think it over, ride into Roswell and wait for me. I'll be there in a day or two."

Matt turned to Lash and Socorro. "Maybe that little wench doubled back across the river. But we'll find her."

He reined around and rode down the draw. Socorro and Lash followed, the latter glancing malevolently over his shoulder at Glenn.

When they had gone, Glenn walked over and lifted his saddle aside. He threw back the blankets and Charlie stood up. She was a muddy spectacle gulping at the fresh air.

"This was one time when being a half-pint really paid off," she breathed, smiling wanly at him.

While the clouds broke up overhead, Glenn and the girl headed south below the rim of the valley, riding double. The sun had set and a full moon was rising when they reached the Bottomless Lakes.

These were a series of small, natural lakes, named by the first drovers to reach the valley. Glenn knew the story of how the drovers had dropped lead-weighted lines into the water but were never able to plumb the depth of the lakes. A logical failure, he considered, if the lines were caught and carried along by an underground stream which was now believed to feed the lakes. For all the pristine beauty of their quiet waters, the lakes looked indefinably forbidding, and Glenn was unable to push from his mind that superstition of earlier days.

The second lake was rimmed on three sides by sheer rock walls. Near it they found a craterlike depression which contained no water. The crater and the lake were separated by a common wall, no more than six feet across at the top.

They made camp in the crater, where the glow of their fire could not be seen from the valley. Charlie sat on a flat rock near the fire, letting its warmth dry her clothing.

THE outcome of Glenn's encounter with the Kinnards and Socorro had amazed her, particularly the way he had subdued Lash. Glenn himself felt that his handling of the situation had somehow struck a quirk in the old man's perverse nature, or it might have ended otherwise.

Glenn sat across the fire from Charlie, feeling that sensual pleasure flow through him while he watched her, the intimacy of her presence sating some of the loneliness his years had accumulated. Her silence had affected him and he was reluctant to break its spell. But no man could ride a blind trail forever.

"You'd heard Matt Kinnard speak of me before, hadn't you?" he spoke finally. "What is he to you, Charlie?"

She sat very still and straight now, staring somberly into the fire. "He's my father-in-law," she said slowly.

He had already considered it, but that did nothing to soften the impact. "Then you and Lash . . ."

"Glenn, I'm sorry—more than anyone could ever know." Her eyes lifted to his drawn face, pleading for his understanding. "The Kinnards came to the valley six months ago, and Lash began to charm the women with his handsome looks and his gracious manners at the local dances. He fooled everyone, but little Charlie McQuinn was even more gullible than the rest. I didn't realize it till the night of the wedding when we were on the way back from Roswell. Maybe I wanted to show the other girls I could beat them out with him. Or maybe it was because of my pa. He's always seemed hard and unfair with me. I guess I made the mistake of leaping at the first chance to get away from him."

"Then it *was* Lash's quirt that made the cut on your shoulder."

"That hadn't happened before today. He flew into a rage this morning and sent me to my room when I finally told him I was leaving him. I climbed out a window and sneaked away on foot. They had been hunting me all day when I found your camp."

"Kinnard spoke of a man named McQuinn," Glenn mused. "So he's your father? And now there's trouble between him and Kinnard?"

"It started soon after I married Lash, four weeks ago. Matt Kinnard started moving his cattle onto grass that my pa —Saul McQuinn—had always used. Pa's men have driven the cattle back several times. It's reached the point where the outfits are sometimes taking potshots at each other across the boundary now. I suppose Matt Kinnard figured pa would hesitate to fight him, because of me. I've begged Lash to stop Matt. But—like father, like son."

Glenn stood up, angry at himself for having swallowed Kinnard's lure. He knew the pattern that was takng shape here in the valley. One man's avarice began imposing its aims on the rights of another. Soon both sides were hiring gunmen and in the end somebody got hurt, bad.

"What're your plans?" he asked Charlie. "Going home to your pa?"

"I can't, Glenn. He practically disowned me when I left to marry Lash. At least he was right about that. I couldn't go crawling back and beg him

to take me in again. Can you understand that?"

For the first time Glenn noticed the shine of her tears in the firelight. He had an impulse to take her in his arms and kiss the tears away. But a deep, inner process of reasoning kept reminding, *She's another man's woman.* For a long time he stood there, so filled with rended emotion that he could not speak. Finally, he turned and started moving away.

"Glenn?"

"I'm sleeping up on the rim tonight," he answered. "I'll leave my blankets and supplies with you as long as you want to stay here. But that can't be forever. You've got a decision to make, Charlie, and I'm afraid I can't help you reach it."

HE was heavily conscious of the silence between them when he saddled up the next morning. He was starting to mount when she moved toward him and said, "Where are you riding, Glenn?"

"To the Leaning K."

There was bitterness in the curl of her lips. "So you're taking Matt Kinnard's job, after all."

"Let's say I'm still trying to learn the setup."

Something in the way he said it seemed to assuage her doubts. "You'll be back in a few days to let me know?" she asked.

Glenn nodded. She was standing close to him, staring into his face. Her mouth was anything but bitter now. It had grown soft and quiescent. Her lips were parted slightly, in a tentative, expectant way. Glenn felt irresistibly drawn by them, and his own mouth came down to press them hungrily. When he realized what was happening he grasped her shoulders and pushed her away from him. He turned blindly and stepped into the stirrup. Another man's woman . . .

"I've never really belonged to him, Glenn, not in my heart . . ."

But he swung the sorrel's head and rode away quickly, not trusting himself to look back.

His mood was wearing off somewhat by the time he swam his horse across the muddy red current of the Pecos. He rode westward with an appreciative eye for the country. The undulant floor of the valley was well sodded with grama and saltgrass. No less a man than John Chisum, cattle king, had recognized this land's promise and settled here. Chisum's day was past now, but the valley was still a cowmen's paradise. Or maybe it was in reality a cowmen's hell, Glenn reflected.

The day had grown hot and humid when he reached the headquarters of Leaning K. The scattering of corrals and weather-grayed buildings presented that same look of unkempt shabbiness which Glenn associated with old man Kinnard himself.

Glenn rode past the corner of a dilapidated barn and reined up quickly. Socorro Slade was standing there in the scant shade of the barn. The two men stared at each other in that moment of breathless, mutual surprise.

Socorro's pocked visage grew dark with the rage that suddenly choked him, and his hand moved to the gun butt at his narrow hip.

"Go ahead and try it, Socorro," Glenn said.

Socorro tried. Glenn left the saddle in a headlong dive. His shoulder struck Socorro in the chest and slammed him back against the barn wall. Glenn had landed on all fours in the dust, and he grabbed Socorro's boots as the man came reeling forward after crashing into the wall. Socorro's unprotected fall jarred the wind out of his belly and the gun out of his hand.

Glenn got up and kicked the gun aside. He said, "We'll have to quit this horseplay, Socorro, or one of these times we'll end up getting mad. We can't have that, if I'm going to work here, too."

Matt Kinnard happened onto the scene just then, and his burst of gurgling laughter brought Glenn around to face him.

"Ain't he a cool one, Socorro?" Matt wheezed hands clutching his trembling paunch. "Ain't he a cool one, though? He's right, too. I'd feel mighty hurt if—

he-he-he—if we wasn't all like a big happy family here."

Matt's enjoyment of this was lost on Socorro Slade. The thin gunman pulled himself up off the ground, gasping for breath.

Matt clapped Glenn roughly on the shoulder and said, "Changed your mind about the job, hey?"

"You're Matt Kinnard? I wasn't sure yesterday. I'm Glenn Anders."

It startled Matt. "You're Anders? How come you didn't say so?"

"Nobody asked me."

The old man's belly started shaking again. "I'm afraid we was all excited yesterday. Everybody—he-he-he—except you. Sorry we rubbed you the wrong way."

"Found the girl yet?" Glenn asked. "Who is she?"

"Lash's wife. He's my boy. Him and some of the hands are still out hunting her. McQuinn's her pa, but we know she ain't at his place. Lash and her had a little falling out." Matt winked slyly. "But he'll tame her when he finds her again."

Glenn curbed the impulse to bury his fist in that big paunch. He said, "Why not get the law to help find her?"

Matt snorted derisively. "Taters Yount, the sheriff, is a wore-out old hasbeen who can't even find a deputy to side him. He's got just barely enough bloodhound in him to smell his way down the street from his office to a plate of fried taters and cornbread at the Chink restaurant in Roswell."

Toward evening the Kinnard riders began drifting in off the range for supper. They were patently a hard-bitten, hard-working crew with whom Matt Kinnard's word was the only law.

At twilight Lash Kinnard and two others still had not showed up. Glenn was standing in the yard with Matt after supper, when two horsemen approached on the trail from the west.

Matt said in an ominous tone, "Oh-oh, we got important visitors. That's McQuinn and the sheriff."

They halted near the barn and Matt moved out ponderously to meet them. Glenn followed and stopped a few steps behind him, aware that Socorro Slade had come over from the bunkhouse and was lurking in the shadow of a small shed to Matt's left.

"Kinnard!" Saul McQuinn rumbled the arresting word as though it were an oath. He was a blocky, stiff-necked old man with long black hair. His sweating face was a square of seamed brown marble. A life of hard work had chiseled those lines and bitterness had shaded them starkly. Studying him, Glenn got the impression that McQuinn distrusted every human besides himself, and even rationed the pleasures of his own existence to the point of austerity.

It was different with Taters Yount, the sheriff. Here was a balding, round-shouldered wisp of a man who derived pleasure from even the least little things, his only regret being that so many of them were behind him and so few ahead, his only possible worry that trouble was brewing in his bailiwick and he was getting too old to keep the lid clamped on. But none of that showed in his clear blue eyes. They were youthful and impish.

"Howdy, Matt." Yount's smile had a wry cant. "I rode out here with Saul, knowing you boys would respect the presence of the law." He patted the old Paterson five-shot pistol he wore. Somehow the gesture looked feeble. Then he rubbed his lean belly. "Supper ain't over, is it? It's a long ways from town. Some fried taters and cornbread would sure fix me up where I'm all tore down."

McQuinn snapped, "Shut up, Taters, and let me have my say."

Matt Kinnard said heavily, "Go ahead, McQuinn, and run your dogies into the corral."

"I heard in town this evening that my daughter's missing. I'm serving notice right now, Kinnard—if she's been mistreated here, so help me I'll shoot you and that worthless son of yours clean through the guts!"

Matt was unused to being threatened. "That might not be so easy," he said angrily. "Why get so worked up over her? When she was living with you, didn't

you nearly run her crazy? Maybe that's why she's run off now. I ain't responsible for whatever silly notions are in her head."

McQuinn's face grew livid and twisted with the emotion rolling deep in his soul. Glenn thought the man was doing penance now for his treatment of Charlie.

McQuinn kept shaking his fist at Matt. "You slimy-tongued old reprobate, I'm her *father*, you understand? I'm giving you three days, hear? If she ain't found by then, I'm coming back here to smoke you Kinnards down, and them two heeldogs of yours or nobody else can't stop me. Maybe I oughtn't even wait—"

But Taters Yount had drawn his Paterson. He said wisely, "All right, Saul, we're leaving now. It was a long ride for such short palaver, but you've had your say and that's all I promised you."

The sheriff looked at Matt and said without noticeable rancor, "I got one little dogie to chouse in, myself, seeing the gate is down. Better have the boys quit shoving your stock onto other men's graze, Matt. You're old enough to know better."

He caught the bridle of McQuinn's horse and they started away. McQuinn turned and shouted, "Three days, Kinnard! If anything's happened to her—"

CHAPTER III

Law-Badge Lure

ROSWELL was normally a sleepy little cowtown, rearing up unpretentiously from the flat level of the grassland in the middle of the valley. The only trees within sight were the stately cottonwoods which marked Chisum's old South Springs headquarters outside the town. Capitan's far-off, snow-capped peak was clearly visible in the west when Glenn Anders entered the town next day, Saturday, riding with Matt Kinnard and Socorro and three other men from the Leaning K. Lash and the rest of the crew had left the ranch again early that morning, still trying to cut sign on the girl.

It was pay day at the end of the month, and Roswell's drowsiness was being interrupted by the resulting influx of humanity and horseflesh and wagons. The single street was a panorama of dusty, jostling traffic through which Matt led his men toward the hub of activity at the Buckhorn Bar.

Hitching their mounts at the Buckhorn's tie-rack, they moved under the wooden arcade and stopped languidly in the shade it offered from the sun's brassy heat. Before long Glenn noticed that other men were inclined to give Leaning K a wide berth. That failed to bother Matt. If anything, it nourished his perverse pride.

Glenn left them at the Buckhorn and at noon he purposely found the restaurant Matt had mentioned the day before. Halfway through his meal, he saw Taters Yount come shuffling in, sure enough. The little old man took a seat at the counter beside Glenn, and Glenn smiled with amusement at the order which appeared automatically and was set in front of Yount by the Chinese cook. Fried potatoes and cornbread.

"You eat that for breakfast, too?" asked Glenn.

The sheriff turned with a grin, but there was a vague withdrawal of its heartiness when he recognized Glenn. "Anything better?" he said.

He attacked the meal with obvious relish. Glenn was thinking the sheriff stayed so skinny because it was hard work toting all that greasy food around in his belly, when Taters said matter-of-factly without looking at him, "I been sizing you up, and you don't look like the kind of man that would work for Matt Kinnard."

Somehow it startled Glenn, but he took it with outward stoicism. "Maybe Matt hasn't thought of that," he said. He paid for his meal and went outside.

The shooting occurred five minutes later in a deadfall called the Steerhead, diagonally across the street from the restaurant. Glenn was still standing in front of the latter when he saw men come spilling out the Steerhead's batwings in a frantic rush, and then heard the ominous boom of shots from the saloon's interior. Traffic thinned out in

front of the place as though by magic. A man wearing an apron came running belatedly out of the Steerhead, and another shot from within kicked up dust close to his heels as he angled across the street.

Glenn joined the excited throng which gathered on the boardwalk on this side. The man with the apron was running about and waving his arms wildly. "Run me out of my own place!" he was yelling at the crowd. "It's Wes Larson, Saul McQuinn's foreman. He's a mean drunk. Him and Chigger Colby got in an argument and he shot Chigger dead. He says if Matt Kinnard and his boys want to come in and get him, just let 'em try. He run me out of my own place!"

The portent of it held Glenn rigid. Chigger Colby was one of the punchers Matt had brought to town. It looked like the fat was really in the fire now.

"Where's the sheriff?" somebody shouted. But Taters Yount, bareheaded, was already coming out of the restaurant. He calmed the saloonman and heard his story. Then he stood gazing toward the silent saloon where McQuinn's foreman was holed up alone, waiting.

GLENN'S searching gaze picked out Matt and Socorro hastening up this way. He turned back in time to see old Taters start walking toward the Steerhead, hand on the butt of his Paterson.

There was something pitiable in the old man's shuffling gait. He stopped presently and called, "In the name of the law, Larson, come out and give yourself up!"

The answer was a bullet that ricocheted off an adobe wall beyond Taters after barely missing his head. Taters ducked violently and scuttled to the protection of a stone watering trough at the street's edge, barely making it before the next shot came. The oblong trough was only two feet high. Taters fell on his belly behind it and lay there panting from the exertion, shaking his head in an angry, helpless way.

Glenn studied the watching crowd. For years they had been kidding Taters to his face. Now some were laughing silently behind his back, and nobody offered to help him. Glenn's heart went out to the old man then, something compelling him to turn and face Matt Kinnard as the bearded man forged his way through the crowd with Socorro and the other two close behind him.

"We don't need any string-halted sheriff to help us settle accounts for Chigger," Matt was growling. "Ain't that right, boys? An eye for an eye, that's it. We'll go in and take care of that dirty killer ourselves. Where's McQuinn? What's he got to say? Maybe we'll clean up his whole bunch while we're—"

"Wait, Matt," Glenn said. "You hired me for gun-work, didn't you? This town needs a lesson, and I'd like to hand them one. Let *me* get Larson, Matt."

From the first, he had recognized that perverse pride in the rancher, and he was counting heavily now on the way it functioned. Matt eyed him keenly. Finally he shrugged, grinned in a lupine way and said, "You got the task, boy. Show 'em what you can do. Go in and take him like Grant took Richmond."

Larson had been shooting from a window of the Steerhead. Glenn walked out calmly from the crowd and sent a shot through the window. It kept McQuinn's foreman down long enough for Glenn to join Taters behind the watering trough. Taters' screwed-up face held a puzzled expression when he wriggled around to face Glenn.

They were beyond earshot of the crowd. Glenn said, "You were right about me working for Matt, only he don't know it yet. You need a deputy, Taters?"

Taters' blue eyes bulged. "What's your name, son?"

"Glenn Anders. I worked six years under Buck Rand at Amarillo."

"Fried taters and cornbread!" the old man swore softly. "I've heard of you." He began to dig awkwardly through his pockets. "I got a deputy's badge here somewheres. Dunno why I been carrying it around all this time. You sure you want the job?"

"Slip me that badge, Taters. I've been anxious to get back in the harness."

Glenn had not realized the truth of his statement until now. He gripped the tarnished badge a moment, and the feel of it filled him with a strange satisfaction. He pocketed the badge and Taters said, "Consider yourself sworn in."

There was a vague dampness in the sheriff's eyes now. Replacing the spent cartridge in his Colt, Glenn said irrelevantly, "If something happened to Saul McQuinn, would the girl inherit his spread?"

"Reckon so. She's his only kin, and he's so tight he can't stand the idea of making a will."

"And Charlie's married to Lash—no matter how the wind blows. No wonder Matt and his son are so interested in locating her. No wonder Matt's been trying to force McQuinn into a fight."

"And Saul's promised to pay Matt a call, if she don't show up by two days from now. That's our problem now."

Glenn winked at him. "We got an ace in the hole, you and me. We know where the girl is."

Taters' eyes widened. "We *do?*"

"But keep it under your hat for the time being."

"I'll remember," Taters grinned, "when I put it on again."

Glenn peered around the corner of the trough. A bullet from the saloon window struck the ground close enough to whip dust into his face. "That hombre can shoot, snootful or not," he breathed, drawing back. "From where he's standing he can watch the back way, too, so we might as well play it straight down the middle. You cover me, Taters. After I'm in there, keep your eye on Matt and his men if McQuinn shows up. It's a sure bet he's in town. Don't let them start anything."

"Good luck," Taters said tautly. "Don't forget this old Paterson is dry after the fifth slug."

"Let 'er rip," Glenn said. He was up and running on Taters' second shot.

IT was sixty feet across the street. Glenn made it in a dozen strides. Leaping across the boardwalk, he caught a partial glimpse of the man flattened against the wall just inside the Steerhead's window, and knew the man had seen him, too. When the half-doors loomed ahead of him, Glenn bent low at the last moment and threw his body sideways in under them.

Larson had lined his gun at the spot where the hinged batwings normally would have parted, and his shot went over Glenn. Gun arm held up straight beyond his head, Glenn struck the floor inside and went rolling, his brain filled with a crazily whirling view of Larson's flushed, snarling face and his belligerent stance.

Glenn fired from flat on his belly, and saw blood's rapid stain on the man's right sleeve. Larson's gun clattered on the floor. Goaded by the pain in his arm, he came at Glenn in a lurching charge. Glenn sidestepped as he came off the floor. He whacked Larson on the head with his gun barrel. The man fell and lay still.

Chigger Colby's body lay on its face in the middle of the room. Glenn stared at the corpse a moment, then took out the badge Taters had given him and pinned it to his shirt front.

Fingers hooked in Larson's shirt collar, he dragged the unconscious man all the way across the street to where Taters stood waving his gun slowly at Matt Kinnard and his men. Saul McQuinn stood stiffly off to one side, and that natural bitterness focused sharply in his seamed, sweating countenance when he saw Glenn with the captive in tow.

"What is this, Anders?" Matt Kinnard eyed the badge on Glenn's shirt with a dark, growing suspicion. "If Larson ain't dead, we aim to string him up."

"I reckon not," Glenn said flatly. "I'm not working for you any more, Matt. Larson's in the custody of the law."

McQuinn put in sternly, "Nobody's throwing a man of mine in jail for defending hisself against Kinnard's hired killers."

"He'll cool his heels in a cell," Glenn

contradicted, "at least till a jury decides one way or the other."

Socorro Slade stood at Matt's elbow, his narrow eyes smoky with some malevolent intent. "All along," he purred, "I thought Matt was making a mistake with you, Anders. You might think you've made fools of us now. But we'll get you. We'll get you good."

Glenn said, "Any time, Socorro, any time. Right now let's break up this little meeting. Get this, Matt—you, too, McQuinn. If me or Taters catches your outfits in the same end of town any more today or any other day, we'll jail the lot of you!"

CHAPTER IV

Widow-Maker!

THE last ranch crew had pulled out before dawn, and Roswell was quietly nursing a town-sized hangover when Glenn awoke that Sunday morning in his room at the hotel. After breakfast and a talk with Taters at the jail, he saddled his sorrel and rode eastward away from town.

He skirted the ranches of McQuinn and Matt Kinnard and angled southeast toward the Bottomless Lakes. It had been two days since he left Charlie. It seemed a very long time. Approaching the lake where he had left her, Glenn was conscious again of that strange, poignant nostalgia.

Fear struck him when he rode out of the cedars near the lake and saw no signs of life at the crater. He quit the saddle and climbed hurriedly up the steep incline toward the crater's rim. Relief flowed through him when he reached the top.

Charlie stood at the bottom of the crater, sunlight glistening on her dark wavy hair, something infinitely untamed and beautiful in the lines of her compact body. Her bosom and shoulders were drawn up rigidly as though in anticipation of an impact. Her black eyes gradually softened as she stared up at him, and some inward agitation contorted her face with its relief.

"I heard the horse," she said. "I wasn't sure it was you."

She was moving up the incline toward him as he started down. She buried her face against his chest, arms clutching him tightly. Glenn's mind was a chaos of conflicting emotions. He felt himself turning on the slope so that she was standing a little above him, her face on a level with his.

Her lips were parted softly in that tentative way. "Glenn, Glenn," she said huskily. Fiercely. Insistently.

He forgot all his resolutions and kissed her, hard. When it was done he was ashamed of it and turned his head away from her.

"I thought you'd never get back," she whispered. "Something's happened between us that could make me forget everything that's gone before. Don't you feel it, too?"

When he did not answer, she said in a hurt, resigned voice, "But you hate yourself for giving in to it even for a moment. Is that it?"

"I only know you're Lash's wife," he said dully, "and I can never have you as long as he's alive."

"How can I make you understand?" She pleaded. "Glenn, Glenn . . ."

For the first time she noticed his badge. "You're Taters Yount's deputy?" she said with an attempt at brightness. "I'm glad you're not working for Matt Kinnard."

"You've got to go back, Charlie. To your pa, I mean."

"No, Glenn, I can't . . ."

He grasped her shoulders hard. "You little fool, he loves you, no matter how he's treated you. I think he's changed, really changed toward you, since he heard you'd disappeared. If you don't show up, he's sworn to go after the Kinnards by tomorrow night, and there's only one way it could end. Haven't you guessed the Kinnard's game? Can't you see why Lash wanted to marry you? With your pa dead, you'd inherit his spread and the Kinnards would—"

"The Kinnards would what, Anders?"

That accusing voice ripped into Glenn's consciousness and jerked him around. He

felt a heaviness in his stomach when he saw Lash Kinnard on the catwalk-like ledge between the crater and the lake beyond. Lash had crawled up there stealthily from below. Now he had straightened up and was covering them with his Bisley Model pistol. There was a writhing, awesome expression on his florid face, and his burly body trembled with the rage that gripped him.

Charlie uttered a low, frightened cry. "Lash—"

"Get away from him," Lash screamed, insane with jealousy. "I'll deal with you later, Charlie. *I said step away from him!*"

Glenn pushed her aside without taking his eyes off Lash.

"You knew where she was all the time!" Lash hurled at him. "It's lucky I saw you heading this way and followed you. Wait'll Matt and the others hear how I've nailed me a turncoat deputy sheriff— *No, stay away from him, you half-pint trollop!* Shuck your gunbelt, Anders, and come up here!"

Glenn's fingers fumbled momentarily with the buckle before he felt his gunbelt come loose and drop at his feet. Charlie was sobbing brokenly behind him when he started climbing the incline toward Lash, wondering why Lash had not fired already. Probably the man was so enraged he was uncertain of what he was going to do, himself.

"Stop bawling, Charlie, and watch your Romeo get his medicine up close, in the guts," Lash snarled mockingly. "The fishes need a feed, don't they, Charlie? Be patient, little fishes, be patient—"

THE incline was steep here. Glenn climbed as slowly as he dared, brain groping wildly for some way out of this. Lash kept ranting, goading the girl below. Near the top, Glen's left hand found a firm grip on an imbedded rock. He purposefully caused one foot to slip a little then. His right hand closed on an egg-sized stone and it came loose in his hand.

Thinking Glenn to be helpless for the moment, Lash had his blazing eyes on the girl. While his left hand supported his weight, Glenn quickly poised his right arm, knowing that one chance was all he had.

He hurled the stone. It shot true to the mark, bouncing off the side of Lash's head, stunning him briefly. Glenn pulled himself up quickly, clambering onto the ledge on his hands and knees. Lash aimed a kick at his head, but Glenn rolled his head with the blow and threw himself up in under Lash's gun.

The Bisley Model exploded harmlessly. Glenn had wrapped the fingers of his left hand around its barrel and twisted, at the same time shoving his weight against Lash. Lash stumbled backward to the brink of the ledge. The footing there started to crumble, and some of the debris showered into the water below with an audible splash.

Lash's rage vanished abruptly at the sound. The muscles of his face began working in a frenzy of fear. "No, Anders, no!" he yelled. "I can't swim, I can't swim—"

He let go of his gun, grabbing for Glenn's shirt front with both hands. But his hold on the weapon was all that had been supporting him. He suddenly went backward over the edge and plummeted downward, arms and legs pistoning crazily as though he were trying to fight his way back up through thin air. He struck the lake's surface with a huge splash, the water swallowing up his incoherent screaming.

For a long moment Glenn stood panting on the ledge, staring down in an awed fascination, before something Lash had screamed got through to an inner recess of his thoughts. *I can't swim . . .*

It was twenty feet down to the water. Glenn dived head-first off the ledge, arms knifing the water smoothly ahead of his body and then carrying him down into the depth of the lake with powerful strokes. His eyes began to smart when he opened them to peer around for Lash's bulk. Sunlight filtered softly from above and gave the water down here an eerie, blue-green iridescence.

His lungs started to ache while he swam around searching for Lash. Then he felt the strong tug of an undercur-

rent, sucking him downward and he knew why he had not found the man. Panic seized him in that instant, but he gathered his wits and fought the undertow with a determined pumping of his arms and legs. By the time he had extricated himself from that invisible force, he thought his lungs would burst any second. His wind gave out and he had taken a little water when he reached the surface again.

He crawled out on the open south bank of the lake and lay there until his vomiting nausea had passed. He became aware that Charlie was kneeling beside him, some deep, brooding concern in her tear-filled eyes.

"I couldn't find him," he gasped.

She seemed not to hear. She stared out across the lake and said in a vague, wondering way, "They say a drowning man always goes down three times—"

He forgot his weakness and sat up. "That's superstition. There was an undertow and it took him—"

His voice trailed off. He stared at her, horrified. She turned back and met his gaze. What was she thinking?

It struck him, then. It was something he had said, himself. *I can never have you as long as he's alive . . .*

"No, Charlie! You don't think I could bring myself to hold him under until—"

She shrugged with a palpable effort. "I hate for any man to die, especially because of me, but he tried to ruin my life and it's a blessing that he's gone. He aimed to kill you, up there. But he's gone now, Glenn, and it doesn't matter—"

"It *does* matter," Glenn shouted, jerking to his feet. "Do you think we could stand to look at each other, with something like that between us?"

Now she was standing, too. She moved forward with her hands lifting toward him. "Please, Glenn, I didn't say—"

He jerked away at her touch. A harsh, unreasoning anger rode him. "You said enough, Charlie. You've said too much, I guess. You got me into this jackpot, and now you spring a thing like this on me when you're free of him! Maybe you'd like to be free of me, too. Well, you've got your wish. I'm stepping out of the trap and leaving the bait for the next poor sucker that comes along. I'm heading back to town—alone. If you aim to reach your pa's spread in time to keep him from getting his fool head shot off, you'd better start hoofing it right away!"

CHAPTER V

Lonesome Gun

NEWS had a way of traveling fast. By Monday afternoon the word of Lash Kinnard's fate out there at the Bottomless Lakes had already got back to Glenn Anders in Roswell. Glenn knew that Saul McQuinn must have learned the story when Charlie came home, and the cantankerous old man had quickly started the news to circulating.

The pattern was evident. Despite the help Glenn had given Charlie, McQuinn still had a grudge against him for the jailing of Wes Larson. Further, McQuinn was thinking of his troubles with the Leaning K. He knew that Matt Kinnard, upon learning of his son's death, was certain to go on the warpath, and if Glenn and Taters managed to tally Matt and some of his riders in the resulting showdown, it would suit McQuinn fine.

Sitting with Taters in the sheriff's tiny office on the west side of the street, Glenn knew the rankling anger of a man caught hopelessly in the middle. The pain of his quarrel with Charlie was still sharp whenever he thought of her. Only his loyalty to Taters kept him here in the valley. The old sheriff was in a tight spot, too, and needed help.

The town was quiet, ominously quiet. When this hush was disturbed by the low clip-clop of horses' hoofs, Taters looked out a window and saw two riders coming down the street. He grunted something that interrupted Glenn's b r o o d i n g thoughts and swung his attention that way.

Saul McQuinn's stiffness of neck lent a look of rigid implacability to his whole body. Charlie rode at his stirrup, shoulders jouncing easily to her pinto pony's

gait. She wore fresh Levis and a white silken shirt that rippled with the slight movement of her bosom. A roll-brimmed hat was tilted back on her head, the knotted ends of its rawhide lanyard dangling at her throat.

They hitched their mounts in the alley next to the hardware store across the street. Charlie came around to the store's shady gallery and stopped there a moment, looking across the street toward the office. Glenn could not make out her expression, but just seeing her, and remembering, was enough to awaken that throbbing remorse in him again.

"A woman," Taters said sympathetically, "is like a pet poodle-dog. Never owned one myself, but I bet you they're a nuisance."

After McQuinn followed her into the store, Glenn wondered why the man had pulled the rifle out of his saddle scabbard and carried it with him. McQuinn and the girl remained out of sight within the store.

Half an hour later Taters slapped his lean thigh in a restless way and got up from his chair. He said, "Wonder where Matt Kinnard is right now. It's like waiting for lightning and knowing for certain it's going to hit you, ain't it? Think I'll take a walk."

He had gone perhaps five steps into the street's hot glare when a gunshot blasted the stillness. Inside the office Glenn stiffened, dreadful panic running through him when he saw Taters go into a lurching spin and clutch both hands to his belly. Blood came gushing out between his fingers, a shining, ugly red in the sunlight.

Glenn saw the telltale puff of smoke at a window of the Buckhorn Bar up the street. In a spasm of savage emotion he jerked out his Colt and triggered three times. He heard the jangle of broken glass up there, and then he pulled back from the doorway as Taters came reeling back inside with a shining red trail behind him. He spilled headlong on the floor, rolled onto his side and stared up at Glenn with pain-filled eyes, hands still clutching his middle.

Glenn knelt beside him, feeling numb all over. "Tater—"

"That lightning struck sudden-like," Taters whispered.

"Don't talk, Taters, you ain't done yet, I'll fetch a doctor—"

Taters wagged his head slowly. "Don't waste time on me, son. Quit frowning . . . it ain't so bad. I'm heading for pasture . . . where there ain't no picket ropes to hold a man . . . and the graze is . . . fried taters and cornbread . . ."

That ragged whisper trailed off into silence. Glenn straightened, but waited until he had stopped trembling before moving away from Taters' body. He was aware that the savage, seething anger he had known at first was gone. In its place was a cold, calculating, implacable anger, tempered by the grim reflection that he was one man now against Matt Kinnard's many.

SOMEHOW Leaning K had slipped into town without drawing attention. They had still been gathered within the Buckhorn when Taters left the office. Perhaps they figured Taters would have sprung their trap prematurely, anyway, by detecting their presence when he came up the street. Either that, or Matt Kinnard had shot him for the sheer, bestial enjoyment of it, and to impress Glenn with the fact that law was meaningless now. Knowing Matt, Glenn thought it was the latter.

He put three new shells into the cylinder of his Colt. He was certain that by now some of Matt's bunch had crossed to this side of the street. It would be necessary to flank him if they expected to smoke him out before the townspeople found the courage to come to his aid. The thought goading him, he ran back through the aisle of the cellblock adjoining the office. The door at the end of it was unlocked. He opened it warily and peered both ways. No one was in sight.

Behind the jail was a small, three-walled shed Taters had erected for storing cordwood in the wintertime. The open side of the shed faced the back of the jail. Glenn hurried to the cover of the shed and flattened himself against

the north wall. By peering out through a crack in the planks he could see the rear of every building north of the jail. When trouble came, he thought it would be from that direction.

It came within half a minute, in the thin, angular shape of Socorro Slade. The gunman edged into view at the corner of a bootmaker's shop, three buildings away. His gun was still pouched, but his hand rested on the butt of it while he moved this way with the silent grace of a stalking mountain cat. His smoky eyes held the rear of the jail with an intense wariness.

He was within twenty feet of the jail's back door when Glenn stepped out of the shed and said, "Over here, Socorro."

Glenn marveled that the man did not pull his gun when he whirled around. He must have thought Glenn had him covered. When he saw Glenn's right hand hanging empty, his eyes jerked wide and a look of angry disbelief crossed his pockmarked face.

"Who shot Taters?" Glenn said gutturally.

"It was Matt," Socorro purred, recovering from his surprise. "Looks like I'm to have the pleasure of getting *you*."

Socorro made his move. Glenn drew his gun with a flowing movement, and it thundered once. Socorro's shot went wild overhead; he was crumpling with a hole in his throat when his finger pulled the trigger.

A huge shabby creature with a flapping red beard came around the corner of the bootmaker's then. Matt Kinnard's lumbering gait held the deceptive speed of a wild bull's charge. There was something of a bull, too, in the rumble that issued from his throat. When he saw Glenn standing there, his green eyes took on a sheen of madness and his face began twitching with the inward torture of that emotion.

"You killed my boy, damn you, you killed my boy," he was yelling.

The Remington .44 was in his hand. He triggered it while he ran, but the bouncing movement of his prodigious body threw his aim off. There was something infinitely terrible in his mad charge, and it had held Glenn spellbound for an instant. The whine of Matt's lead around him brought him out of it. He was thinking of Taters Yount when the Colt started bucking against his palm.

The keg belly of Matt's would have been hard to miss. He stumbled and his body tipped forward at a precarious angle to the ground, but his ponderous momentum brought him lurching onward. He kept working the trigger of his Remington, his bullets making a row of small dust geysers out in front of him now. His lips moved with a shrill, cursing incantation that ended when he finally went down. His body seemed to bounce once before it settled to the ground in front of Glenn, the big arms and legs thrown out in a grotesque way.

Reloading, Glenn hurried into the alley where Scorro and Matt had appeared. The shooting had brought the rest of Matt's men swarming out of the Buckhorn. They were halfway across the street when Glenn reached the head of the alley and opened up on them.

Simultaneously, two more guns began a deadly chatter at the hardware store down the street. Saul McQuinn was kneeling on the gallery there, aiming his rifle into Leaning K's ranks and levering fast after each shot. From a window Charlie took potshots with a hand gun.

Caught in the crossfire, Matt's men milled about in confusion. Three of them had dropped in the street before the others gave up and fled. They disappeared behind the Buckhorn, and a moment later Glenn heard the flurry of hoofbeats that marked their getaway. He knew they would never come back.

Ten minutes later, Glenn rode his sorrel out of the livery stable. A crowd was gathered at the sheriff's office when he came up the street. He saw them watching him and reined up at the tie-rack. He tried to keep his eyes off Charlie. Her father came out of the office, staring solemnly at Glenn.

"Too bad about Taters," McQuinn mumbled. "In a way, it was my fault."

"That makes two of us," Glenn said with a quiet bitterness.

(Continued on page 126)

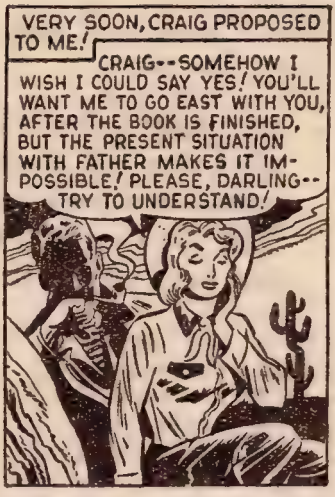
THIS BEAUTIFUL COWGIRL CORRALS A TENDERFOOT ON A WRITING ASSIGNMENT AND HIS LOVE STORY COMES TRUE!

Romance Roundup

JEAN, I HAVE NO ALTERNATIVE BUT TO TURN THE OL' C BAR W INTO A DUDE RANCH!
I WAS BORN IN TEXAS AND HAD LIVED ON DAD'S RANCH ALL OF MY TWENTY-ONE YEARS! EVERYTHING WENT WELL UNTIL DAD MADE SOME POOR INVESTMENTS...

OUR PAYING GUESTS STARTED ARRIVING, AND THEN WE WERE KEPT BUSY FROM DAWN TO DUSK! ONE GUEST WAS JUST LIKE ANOTHER, UNTIL I MET CRAIG WILSON--HE WAS A WRITER WHO HAD COME TO THE RANCH TO GATHER LOCAL COLOR FOR HIS NEW WESTERN NOVEL!
YES, MISS ROBERTS! I HOPE TO WRITE WHAT WILL BE CALLED THE GREATEST WESTERN NOVEL EVER WRITTEN! OF COURSE, IT'S NOT THAT EASY... BUT I WOULD LOVE TO HAVE YOUR COOPERATION... THEY TELL ME YOU KNOW THE WEST LIKE A BOOK!
THE C BAR W IS AT YOUR SERVICE!

AS CRAIG WORKED ON HIS BOOK WE BECAME QUITE FOND OF EACH OTHER! WHEN HE WASN'T WRITING WE WOULD GO RIDING OR SWIMMING, AND TOAST MARSHMALLOWS TOGETHER IN THE EVENING! WHEN CRAIG CAME HERE, HE BROUGHT SUNSHINE AND HAPPINESS WITH HIM! AS FOR FATHER--HE KEPT WATCHING THE RANCH GO FURTHER AND FURTHER INTO THE RED! HE DIDN'T KNOW HOW LONG IT WOULD BE BEFORE HE WOULD HAVE TO GIVE UP THE RANCH ENTIRELY!


VERY SOON, CRAIG PROPOSED TO ME!
CRAIG--SOMEHOW I WISH I COULD SAY YES! YOU'LL WANT ME TO GO EAST WITH YOU, AFTER THE BOOK IS FINISHED, BUT THE PRESENT SITUATION WITH FATHER MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE! PLEASE, DARLING--TRY TO UNDERSTAND!

FINALLY, THE BOOK WAS FINISHED! CRAIG ASKED ME AGAIN TO MARRY HIM, BUT MY ANSWER WAS THE SAME! I'LL NEVER FORGET THE DAY WE SAID GOOD-BYE! HOW MY HEART ACHED--ALL I COULD THINK ABOUT WAS CRAIG AND MY LOVE FOR HIM--YET MY DUTY TO FATHER CAME FIRST!

THEN IT HAPPENED--CRAIG'S BOOK WAS PUBLISHED! IT SURPRISED ME TO LEARN THAT DAD'S RANCH WAS THE LOCALE OF THE STORY! THE BOOK WAS AN INSTANT HIT, AND THE C BAR W RANCH WAS FAMOUS! SOON WE COULDN'T ACCOMODATE THE LARGE CROWDS THAT CAME HERE!
HERE'S YOUR PARTY!
CRAIG, DARLING--IF YOU STILL WANT ME TO MARRY YOU, I...
DO I?! I'M TAKING THE NEXT PLANE OUT!

DARLING--THANKS TO YOU, FATHER'S WORRIES ARE OVER! AND NOW YOU AND I CAN BE MARRIED!
...AND THE ROYALTIES FROM THE BOOK WILL MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO HAVE A LITTLE RANCH OF OUR OWN!

ANOTHER ROMANCE ROUNDUP

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

ON SALE FEB. 25th 1950

The Brushpopper

I

HUGH MITCHELL pulled his horse up sharply, turning it aside to cut off the woman, and forced her to halt. Then he sat there broadside across the trail, eyes squinted with the effort of listening. Late sunlight filtered the Texas brush to cast weird shadow patterns across his fiddling stud horse. There was little sound save the rustling mesquite in the breeze.

"What's the matter?" Agatha Ware asked, from behind him. "Did you hear something?"

He gave her an absent, backward glance, frowning in puzzled irritation. She was a tall girl, in what was no doubt the latest in riding habits from her fashionable London dressmaker. She had called it a Zouave jacket, with full Turkish trousers gathered at her trim ankles. Her shimmering hair was swept up under a matching fez, the same jade green as her eyes. She made a vivid, arresting picture, for a man used to the poor, slatternly, brush-women, in their cheap, cotton wrappers and home-made shoes.

Ramrodding the Broken Shield was a full-time job, Hugh Mitchell figured —until the lovely tenderfoot from the East showed up and proved to him that was only a part of his duties!

"It sounded like voices off to the left," Mitchell told her. "There shouldn't be any Broken Shield hands over this way today. You stay here and I'll take a look."

"Now don't tell me it's dangerous," Lady Agatha said, in a bored, condescending way. "They told me in London I'd find an Indian behind every bush, but I thought that was merely a provincialism."

"Look Lady Agatha," Mitchell told her, patiently. "As foreman of your uncle's ranch, I'm responsible for your safety. I'd rather you waited here."

"I'm coming with you. If I am to take over the Broken Shield, I might as well see its worst side first. I do hope they take this fez off before they scalp me. I'd hate so to get it dirty."

He could not help the anger flashing in the glance he cast her. Then he turned, tight-lipped, and drove his Copperbottom stud into the thick chaparall at the right of the trail, taking a secret pleasure in the soft sounds of disgust she made as the brush raked her face and caught at her clothes.

Mitchell was a big, rangy man, in the saddle, narrow through the hips, broad shoulders bunching up across the neck beneath his linsey-woolsey shirt. His eyes were the color of stirred gunsmoke, creased speculatively at the edges by the weather and a habitual curiosity about all the little signs of life scattered in its wake. His long mouth had a flaring curl to its upper lip that could express anger or humor without changing its line much. His legs, long and cat-gutted with muscle from a lifetime in the saddle, were in the grease-blackened leggins of this brush country.

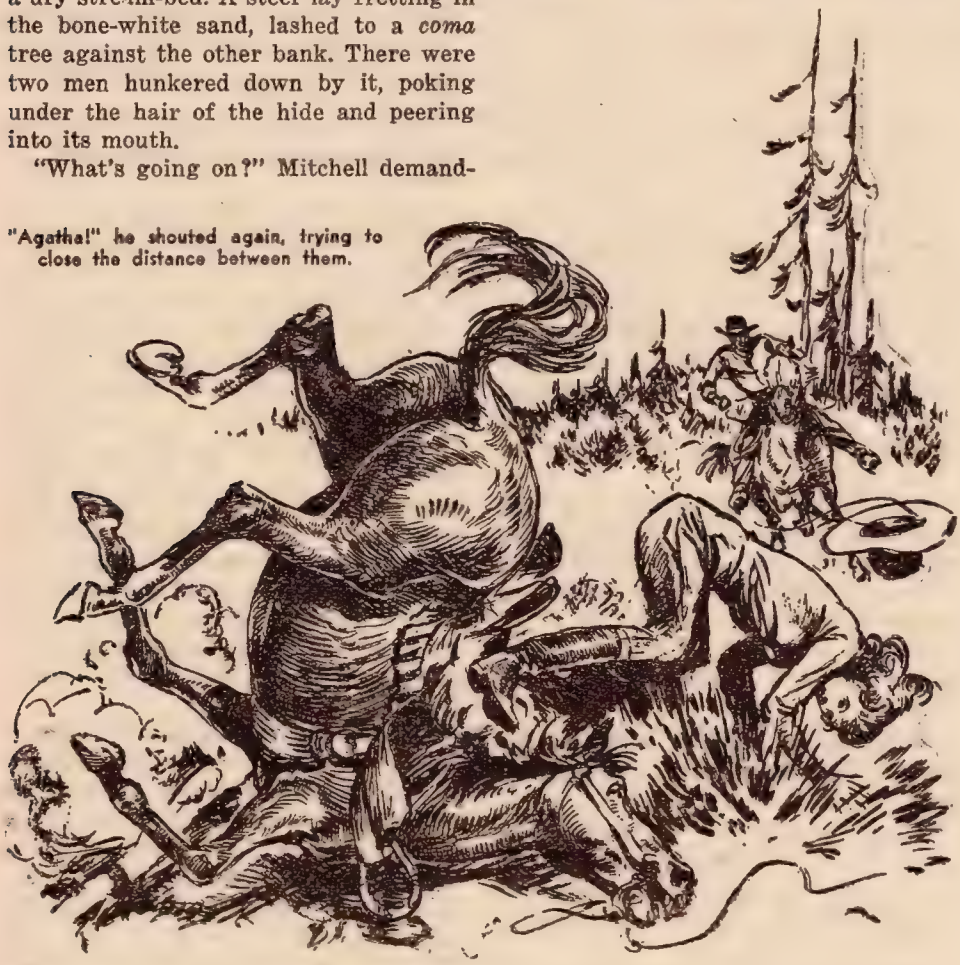
HE threaded the thicket with his eyes wide open and straight ahead, ducking branches and thorns automatically,

and the Lady

by LES SAVAGE, JR.

and with open country in sight ahead, he reached down casually, and tugged his gun loose from its holster. He broke from the thicket onto a bank overlooking a dry stream-bed. A steer lay fretting in the bone-white sand, lashed to a *coma* tree against the other bank. There were two men hunkered down by it, poking under the hair of the hide and peering into its mouth.

"What's going on?" Mitchell demanded. "That's a Broken Shield steer you've got there."



"Agatha!" he shouted again, trying to close the distance between them.

The nearest man rose. He was Fayette Baxter, hard-bitten, with a narrow, pinched face and bitter eyes, shoulders stooped a little in his faded ducking jacket, legs giving a horse-collar bow to his alkali-whitened levis.

"Maybe I'm lookin' for Texas fever, or botholes in the hide," he said insolently. "I heard some of the Broken Shield stuff was running that."

"We have had a little trouble along that line," Mitchell said, "but I don't see it's any of Studs Kelly's business. Has the local gambling fallen off so bad that he has to run a few wet cows on the side?"

"Kelly doesn't have to rustle his beef," the second man said, rising casually to face Mitchell. He was Boa Snyder, with the scars of the brush and the burns of the rope still scoring his hands and face, though he had given them up some time ago to work for Studs Kelly, the Red Wheel gambling boss. Snyder was heavier than Baxter, the beefy bulk of his shoulders stretching at his jacket which was made from an Appaloosa horse; a white hide with dark red spots splashed over it, as if some painter had spilled blood in a bowl of cream. He wore his oak-butted Remington tied down and his flat-topped Mormon had a tell-tale bullet hole through its brim.

Mitchell took in the sandy floor of the wash and the two horses picketed on the other side of the *coma* tree and realized that Snyder was right. There were no signs of a fire and no running irons under their saddle leathers. "If you're not picking up wet beef, what are you doing?" Mitchell asked. "Is your boss figuring to buy some of the Broken Shield stuff."

Snyder's high cheek-boned face held all the impassivity of an Indian's and his voiced rustled soft as silk. "Studs Kelly never buys anything. People like him so much they just give it to him."

"That's r i g h t," Fayette Baxter grinned, "and if they don't give it, he takes it."

"What is it, Hugh?" Lady Agatha asked. "Are these men stealing our cows."

Baxter turned to her, making a short, mocking bow. "If Mr. Mitchell had introduced us, ma'am, I might have told you just what we're doing with this critter."

Mitchell held his anger on a thin string, speaking through stiff lips. "This is Lady Agatha Ware, Baxter."

"Ah, then Studs was right," Baxter murmured.

"About what?" Mitchell asked.

"He said Lord Basil made a stipulation in his will that when he died, in order to inherit the Broken Shield, Lady Agatha had to come to live on the ranch for six months or it went to Lord Basil's nephew. Now why would he do that?"

Agatha made a disgusted sound. "The old fool had some crazy notion I would come to love it as much as he claimed to. He was afraid I might get rid of it without ever seeing it, if he didn't make some stipulation like that." Her lip curled wryly. "How right he was."

Boa Snyder laughed huskily. "You ain't done a very good job of convincing the lady what a pretty country we have, Hugh. I thought you was smoother with the gals than that."

"Let's forget the gals," Mitchell told him. "Untie that steer, Snyder, and let it up."

Snyder turned to his own animal, an old brush-scarred Billie horse with a rawhide-laced saddle. "You untie him. ramrod. I found out what I wanted."

Mitchell swung off his Copperbottom and took one great lunge after Snyder, grabbing his arm and spinning him around. As the man came face-to-face with him, Mitchell saw Fayette Baxter jump to his horse. He never packed a six-gun, but there was an over-and-under thrust in the saddle scabbard on his rigging, and he was after it. Without stopping his motion, Mitchell shoved the off-balance Snyder back into Fayette Baxter. It sent both men hard into the horse, spooking the hairy little bronc so that it reared high, squealing.

Pinned into the animal by Snyder's staggering body, Baxter still managed to pull his over-and-under gun free. But Mitchell had come right in after him, lunging low to smash the point of his shoulder against Boa Snyder's hip, spinning him off to one side. He brought that same shoulder into Baxter's belly, doubling him over. Mitchell twisted away, tearing the over-and-under from Baxter's weakened hands, and wheeled towards Snyder, as the man finally got his feet under him and whirled back, going for six-gun.

Mitchell swung the rifle around by the tip of its barrel so that the butt caught Snyder on the side of his face. He went over sidewards with a sharp cry, sprawling into the sand. Mitchell reversed the

over-and-under to hold it for shooting, spinning back towards Snyder, who had gone to his hands and knees with the pain of that blow in his belly, and was starting to rise again.

"If you're going to get up and untie the cow, go ahead," Mitchell told him. "If not, you'd better stay right there on your hands and knees."

IT was about five miles back to the Broken Shield ranch house, through heavy brush country, laced by winding, little-known trails. After Snyder and Baxter had untied the steer and let it run squalling into the thickets, they had left in a dour, threatening silence, crashing off through the brush towards town. Mitchell had mounted and turned back towards the Broken Shield without a word to Lady Agatha. She rode silently for a few minutes behind him, but when they came to the first space broad enough to ride double, he found her big red bay at his hip.

"What do you suppose they were doing, Hugh?" she asked.

"I haven't any idea," he told her. "They obviously weren't rustling the beef. Studs Kelly's too smooth to have his men do anything that open. As soon as I get you back to the house, I'm going into Red Wheel and see him about this."

"You were rather rough with those men," she said. "Do you always settle your difficulties in such a forthright manner?"

Mitchell's lips drew tight across his teeth. Puzzled by what Snyder and Baxter were doing, still filled with the anger of their insolence, he reacted in thoughtless irritation.

"Maybe we do things a little different out here than you did back in . . . civilization," he said. "Like sitting a saddle. You show more air between you and the kak than the holes in a Davy Crockett fence."

"Have you ever heard of posting?" she asked thinly.

"I rode with your uncle every day," he answered. "He posted, but it never looked like that." Mitchell watched a confused, almost fearful look cross her face. "Lord Basil told me you were such a fine rider," he said. "Jumping contests in Ireland and everything. He'd be mighty disappointed in you right now."

She flushed hotly, tossing her head. "I can jump anything you can," she cried defiantly, and clapped heels to her bay. It broke into a headlong gallop, almost pitching her off its rump. She regained her balance with difficulty, jerking aside to avoid a clawing arm of black chaparral as she burst down the trail. Mitchell kicked his own horse into a gallop.

"Agatha," he called. "Stop it. I didn't mean that. This brush will tear you off in a minute."

She plunged through a hole in a mesquite thicket with a great, roaring crackle of brush that drowned him out. He followed her through, face whipped by shreds of her jacket that had been torn off, his brow corrugated with an intense frown. Now, not only was she showing too much space above the saddle, but her hands jerked high with the reins whenever she shifted to dodge the brush. If the bay had been a spooky horse, it would have shied and pitched her long ago. It was a lack of horsemanship that did not fit in with his conception of an English gentlewoman, somehow. And it only seemed a part of many things that did not fit, little things, that he had noticed, ever since she arrived.

"Agatha," he shouted again, trying to close the distance between them. "I apologize. If you want to jump, don't do it here. These vines will heel your animal for sure."

At this moment, however, the trail opened up before her, with a great, gnarled postoak fallen across the way. She headed straight for it, cropping her animal.

"Let up on the reins," Mitchell shouted. "You're breaking his neck."

But the animal left the ground with her reins still so tight its chin was pulled in. Plunging after her, Mitchell waited to see her weight thrust forward. But it remained too far back. The bay was one of Lord Basil's own jumpers, imported from Ireland, but even this magnificent beast could not compensate for the load

on its rump. Its hind legs left the ground sluggishly, and caught on the log going over, and Mitchell shouted out loud as the horse fell.

THE animal and Agatha disappeared completely beyond the log for a moment, and then Mitchell was taking the jump, with the sight of her lying on the ground beneath a torn mesquite bush. He swung off his stud before it was stopped, dropping the reins and running to kneel beside her.

"You-little fool," he murmured. "You shouldn't have done that, you little fool . . ."

But, suddenly, the words stopped coming out. Because she wasn't little, and she wasn't a fool. She was a large, fully-formed girl, in his arms, and her proximity blotted out all the antagonism he had felt between them before. Her eyes fluttered open, half-lidded, like a sleepy child's sultry and smoky in her daze. Her lower lip grew full, taking on a pouting, satiny curve, and when she took a breath, it swelled her breast against him.

"It's all right, Hugh," she said, huskily. "I don't think I'm hurt."

"You know," he said, "when your guard's dropped, and you let all that London fog roll away, you don't look like England at all, to me."

A sharp, fearful light flashed in her eyes, and she stiffened in his arms, twisting away, suddenly, struggling to sit up. He let her go, sitting back, filled with that puzzlement again. She pulled a strand of red hair back into place, arranging her coif fretfully.

"Just because she had a tumble doesn't give the foreman a right to get fresh with his boss," she said.

He stared at her a moment, trying to define this paradox in her, this mixture of warmth and chill. "I didn't mean to be fresh," he said.

A contrite look filled her eyes, and she bent to grasp his arm. "I'm sure you didn't, Hugh. See if the bay is all right, will you? I think I can ride."

She withdrew her hand abruptly, as if realizing how far she had bridged the gap. When he tried to help her rise, she brushed him off.

"Get the bay, will you?" she said, irritably.

He went after the big, red horse, face flushed a little. What was she doing? It seemed he could still feel her hand on his arm. Like the burn of a poker. No woman had ever affected him that way before. He wasn't going to let it happen, now, was he? With this arrogant, spoiled creature, hot one moment, cold the next, never even knowing her own mind. But as he caught the bay, where it had spooked into a thicket, and felt its legs to make sure that they were not harmed, he knew that he had no control over what was happening to him. When he brought it back to her and held the stirrup, just the sight of her lithe, full body, swinging up, started a little pulse beating raggedly in his temple. He stood there looking up at her, and then turned silently to mount his own horse.

They rode in a long silence, threading their way through a narrow, thorny trail, until the first crumbling walls of an ancient building appeared through the whitebrush ahead. Agatha pulled her bay up, frowning at this, her eyes running down the line of adobe battlements to where the rooms began, most of them roofless rectangles with a few blackened beams remaining, the whitebrush and *agrita* climbing through gaping windows and over crumbling gaps of the maze of walls. It had its own, indefinable beauty, the picturesque beauty of any tangled, ancient ruin, touching something nostalgic in a person. He saw the way her head lifted, the interest kindling in her eyes.

"Better look out," he said. "You'll find yourself liking it."

Anger flashed in her eyes, the haughtiness returning. "I don't think there's any danger of that, Mitchell."

He stared at her, unable to understand her apparent hatred of this country. Born and bred in the brush, he knew a fierce love for its harsh, brutal beauty. It was one thing that had given him such an affinity with Lord Basil, when the Englishman had first come here. Son of

a poor family, Mitchell had gotten a job as a cowhand on the Broken Shield when he was only sixteen, and for nine years, had stayed with Lord Basil, becoming closer to the man than his own nephew, Conrad, had ever been. When he died, Lord Basil had given a choice section of his land to Mitchell, for the time when he would want to start a ranch of his own. He looked forward to that day, and this woman's contempt of a land he loved so deeply instilled in him a deep animosity. He looked towards the crumbled buildings, answering her questions reluctantly.

"It's an old Spanish fort," he said. "I don't think anybody else but the Indians even know it's here. I took you through a short cut to the Broken Shield. You'd probably never be able to find your way back."

"I have an eye for landmarks," she said. "I'd start at the dry wash. I know my way to there, at least. Then I'd turn into the thickets at that pair of burned oaks. I'd follow the holes in the brush till I reached a great black tree shaped like a cross. Here I'd turn straight into the sun, if it were forenoon, or straight away from it in the afternoon. I'd follow that direction about a mile to a heap of bleaching cow skulls. How am I doing?"

"Amazing," he said. "Are you sure you come from England?"

Again there was that flash in her eyes, and the warmth withdrew itself from her face. Without speaking, she reined her horse around and trotted ahead. He did not start immediately. He stared after her, frowning. There was a strange, cold sensation in the pit of his stomach. A laughing owl started cackling off in some brakes, and he glanced over in that direction. Then, with a savage shake of his head, he thumped his horse into a trot, after Lady Agatha.

II

RED WHEEL stood near the southern line of Live Oak county, not much of a town; a strange mingling of squat adobe hovels and two-story, false-fronted frames spreading away from a typical plaza, to peter out quickly in the brush. Most of the business was done in the plaza, and it was towards there that Hugh Mitchell rode, dust ruffling softly from beneath the hooves of his trotting horse. He had left Agatha at the Broken Shield ranch, and headed for town at a good clip, to reach it in late afternoon.

He passed the soft, musical gabble of Mexicans dumping onions and red chiles into a two-wheeled cart as they closed up the stalls comprising the open market along the south side of the plaza. He was heading for Studs Kelly's Aces and Eights, on the north side, but before he reached the tie-racks in front of the building, he saw Ellis Ashford step out from the door of his office, brief-case under one arm. Ashford had been Lord Basil's lawyer for the last few years, and was a tall, distinguished man in Panama hat and tropical whites wilted by a day in the spring heat of this land.

"How's Lady Agatha getting along?" Ashford wanted to know.

Mitchell's brow was corrugated by a small frown. "All right, I guess. How long had it been since Lord Basil saw his niece, Ashford?"

"Ten years or so. Why?"

"You'd never seen her before?"

"Didn't have to. She was the living image of those pictures he gave me."

"She was to get ten thousand pounds upon her arrival, wasn't she?" Mitchell asked. "Whether she decided to keep the ranch at the end of the six months or not."

"That's right," the older man answered. "I've given her the check."

"Has she tried to cash it?"

"Of course not," Ashford snorted. "There isn't a tenth that much cash in Red Wheel, Hugh. That's fifty thousand dollars, you know. What are you driving at? What on earth's the matter "

Mitchell shook his head. "I don't know, Ashford. There's something funny going on—I'll see you at the party tonight."

He necked the Copperbottom on up the line of buildings to the cottonwood racks before Kelly's saloon. It was one

of the few frame buildings in town, a gaudy two-story structure, fronted with white shiplap, gingerbread covering its tawdry facade. A row of windows and bat-wing doors opened out on the boardwalk that ran the length of its front, the only sidewalk in Red Wheel.

It was hot and dusty inside, and what few men stood at the bar took little interest in Mitchell. Opposite the bar, a half-dozen round, deal tables stood, empty and covered at this hour. A house-man sat at the last one, listlessly playing solitaire. Mitchell passed him without a word, going up the broad stairs at the rear, to the balcony above. The dry, insufferable heat of this country had dehydrated them, until they shook and creaked beneath his passage.

Studs Kelly's office opened off the balcony. The door stood open, so Mitchell stepped inside. The room displayed a tawdry attempt at elegance, with its two deep chairs covered with mohair that moths had already eaten into, and the leather-upholstered Turkish ottoman set against one wall, that had been ripped and kicked by spurs until the cotton stuffing was spilling out on the imitation Brussels carpet.

Kelly, himself, sat behind the broad, marble-topped desk. He was facing toward the window, seated in a swivel-chair, his spurred boots propped up on the window-sill. There was a whiskey decanter on the desk, with an open newspaper propped up against it, and he held a half-filled glass in his hand. "Pour yourself a drink, Mitchell," Kelly said, without turning around.

Mitchell said curtly, "When I want a drink, it won't be any of your rot-gut, Studs. I came to find out what kind of hoof-and-mouth inspection your boys were giving the Broken Shield cattle this afternoon."

"Hoof-and-mouth inspection?" Studs Kelly threw back his head and roared with laughter. "That's a good one. Hoof-and-mouth inspection!" The swivel chair shrieked as he turned swiftly around, dropping his boots to the floor with a thump, sloshing whiskey into his glass without looking.

Tall and heavy-shouldered, there was something rakish about the carriage of his shaggy head of curling yellow hair, and the way one eyebrow cocked up in his scarred, heavy face. He had come up out of the brush the hard way, and still wore the rawhide leggins and filthy denim ducking jacket of the brush-hand. His one concession to the fact that he now owned the profitable gambling interests in Red Wheel was the big emerald ring he wore below the broken knuckle on the third finger of his right hand.

"When I'm going to own some property," he said lazily, "I usually have a look at it before I close the tally-book."

Mitchell's jaw tightened. "What do you mean—own some property?"

Studs took an immense cigar from an inlaid ivory box on the desk, whipped out a bowie knife and chopped the end of the stogie off. Then he thrust it between strong, white teeth.

"If young Conrad Ware loses much more at my faro lay-out," he said, he'll have to give me the ranch to pay for his debts."

"The ranch isn't his to give," Mitchell said, his eyes turning the color of gunsmoke. "Lady Agatha inherits the whole thing. Lord Basil knew Conrad would gamble it away in a week if he left it to him."

Studs Kelly grinned. "Maybe it ain't Lady Agatha's to give, neither." Abruptly, he reached for the paper, propped against the decanter, and handed it to Mitchell.

IT was the St. Louis Gazette, dated March 7, 1874. In the middle of the page, Mitchell saw a picture of a woman in a tiny bonnet and full-length cape who bore a striking resemblance to Lady Agatha. His startled eyes dropped to the caption beneath the picture which read, "Denise Parker, an actress with the road-company playing the Lyceum theater here, killed by an unknown person in the Riverview hotel."

"Looks a lot like her, don't it?" Studs Kelly said.

Slowly, Mitchell raised his eyes. When he failed to speak, Kelly took a match

from a drawer, raised one leg to light it on the seat of his pants, and held it up to his cigar. Through the smoke that rose from the tip, he said, "March, the seventh. That would be about the same day Lady Agatha was in St. Louis, wouldn't it?"

Mitchell could restrain his violent reactions no longer and bent clear across the desk grabbing Kelly's lapel and yanking him forward. "What are you insinuating?" he bellowed.

Kelly grasped his wrists with a ferocious strength, and tore his hands off, coming to his feet so violently that he kicked over his chair. The two of them stood facing each other across the desk.

"Don't put your hands on me again, Mitchell," Kelly said gutturally. "I don't have to insinuate anything. Add it up yourself. Lady Agatha Ware got ten thousand pounds the minute she showed up here, didn't she? That's fifty thousand American dollars. Anybody'd commit murder for that kind of money, even a woman."

"But how?" Mitchell demanded, trembling with anger, and with something else he could not define.

Kelly shrugged. "It's simple," he said. "If they look that much alike, a switch in identities would be easy. And if they switched, the present Lady Agatha must have once been actress Denise Parker. Has she been doing a good job of acting, Mitchell?"

Mitchell leaned toward him. "You're wrong, Kelly. This is just a terrible coincidence, and if you go around town talking about it, I'll come back and really put my hands on you."

Kelly took the cigar from his mouth. "You can't bluff me, Mitchell. I know you too well. If you really thought she wasn't a phony, you'd try to take me apart right now. The only thing that's holding you back is that you think maybe I'm right."

Mitchell bent over the desk again, gripping its edge so tightly his hands ached, shouting at Kelly, "That's not so—"

"It is," Kelly roared at him. "Prove I'm wrong. You know you can't. You know if you whipped me it still wouldn't change things. This woman's pulling one of the biggest hoaxes Texas has ever seen, right under our noses. It's so damn big and it's so damn smart it makes me mad as blazes I didn't think of it. She almost got away with it, too. And you know it. Now tell me I'm wrong again."

Mitchell stood staring at the man, his whole body trembling. Then, slowly, he turned and walked out of the office and down the stairs, and out of the saloon, getting on his horse and riding out of Red Wheel, without seeing anything or hearing anything or feeling anything except that deep, indescribable sickness, way down at the pit of him.

III

FOR all his love of this brushland, Lord Basil's idea of a great house had been in the style of an English manor, a great, brisk Georgian structure, rising incongruously out of the brush, with its gables and hiproofs, its iron deers prancing on lawns kept green by an army of gardeners. The brush people had long since ceased to scoff at it, however, for many of the biggest ranchers in this area were backed by English capital.

Mitchell reached the house in the dusk of early evening, with light casting saffron shadows out into the brush from every window of the great house, reminding him of the party that Ashford was giving in Lady Agatha's honor. All the way in, he had tried to decide what he should do. It was only a matter of time until someone else read a St. Louis paper, and put two and two together. And yet, he had no proof that would allow him to make an issue of it now.

He stripped his horse of its saddle, turning it into a pen, then carried his rig towards the tack-room at the south end of the barn. He was inside the door of the barn when he heard Conrad Ware's voice, coming from the smaller door of the tack-room.

"It was an amazing *coup,* I will have to admit. I haven't seen my cousin Agatha since she was ten, and I swear, I never doubted for a moment that you

were she, until I saw that picture in the St. Louis *Gazette*."

"Let go my arm, Conrad," Agatha said, in a taut, hissing way. "You're drunk."

"And you're not Lady Agatha at all. You're Denise Parker, an actress, a tawdry little imposter, trying to cash in on a million dollars—"

"You're hurting my arm. Let go, you fool."

"I'll let you go if you get out. I'll give you this chance. Promise me you'll leave tonight and—"

It was then that Mitchell stepped into the tack-room. Ware wheeled, a blank, surprised look stamped into his face. He was a tall, foppish young man, despite his dark handsomeness, who had come to America on a remittance from his family ten years ago, and who had lived off his uncle here at the Broken Shield when the remittance had been cut off. He was dressed in an expensive, fawn-colored, long-tailed coat, and trousers of skin-tight moleskin. Light from a bull's eye lantern picked up the dangerous flash of his dark eyes and the gleam of white teeth behind the curl of his lip.

"Let her go, Conrad," Mitchell told him.

"Stay out of this, Mitchell. It's none of your business. She's an adventuress. She doesn't belong here."

"I said let her go," Mitchell half-shouted, grabbing the man's arm and spinning him around. It tore Conrad's hand off Agatha's arm and brought into view the gold-headed cane he carried in his other hand. He tried to tear free of Mitchell, raising the cane to strike at the same time. Mitchell blocked the vicious blow and threw his shoulder against Conrad's chest, bulling him backward a couple of steps. It knocked Conrad off-balance and he stumbled and fell back, to sit down on the floor against a saddle-tree. He remained there, sprawled awkwardly on the dirt floor, jaw slack with drunken surprise. Then, with a muttered curse, he struggled to his feet.

Mitchell picked up the cane, as Ware reeled belligerently towards him, and thrust it into his hand. "Now go on into the house and sober up," he told the man.

Ware hesitated, eyes blazing, angular features rigid. At last he moved away, walking unsteadily along and making futile attempts to brush himself off.

Mitchell turned to Agatha, really seeing her then for the first time. She had on a gown of rich green *moire*, cut low to show the alabaster skin of her bare shoulders, and the curve of her deep breast. Picturesque Musquetaire gloves of tan suede reached to her dimpled elbows. Her shimmering red hair was drawn into a *chignon* from which one long curl escaped upon her graceful neck. Mitchell's breath caught in him, and he realized for the first time how his impulse had led him to protect this woman even though he suspected her of being a murderess. Had her beauty that much influence over him? He stared into the shadowed darkness of her eyes.

"Was Conrad talking about the St. Louis papers?" he said. "I saw a picture in the *Gazette* this afternoon. It was of an actress named Denise Parker, who had been murdered in the Riverview hotel on the same day you were supposed to be in town. She looked so much like you, I couldn't have told the two of you apart. Didn't you have a room at the Riverview, too?"

The blood drained from her face, leaving it a chalky oval in the dusky light. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

"That *you* are Denise Parker," he said.

Her voice came in a desperate whisper. "You fool! You fool! How dare you even *suggest* such a thing? I should fire you on the spot. I should have your name so blackened in this country that you could never get a job again—"

"It wouldn't do much good," he said. "Conrad and I aren't the only ones who suspect this."

He saw her underlip begin to quiver. "It's not true," she said, in that same desperate whispering voice. "It's not true."

"I hope it isn't," he said gravely. "And we can prove it right now. Your uncle told me a lot about you that I don't think anyone else around here knows. He gave you a present when you were six

years old that you were very fond of. What was it?"

He saw her lip begin to tremble again. Suddenly, she turned around and her shoulders rose and fell, as she sobbed soundlessly.

"It's true, then," he said. "You're not Lady Agatha. You switched identities with her in St. Louis, killed her, and came on here."

She wheeled back, coming up against him and catching desperately at his arm, tears making pale, glistening streaks against her cheeks in the half-darkness. "I didn't kill her—I didn't! That's one thing you've got to believe. I switched identities with her—I'll admit that—but it was her idea. She saw me at the Lyceum the last night we played there. It was the same night our manager ran out on us, leaving the company stranded and broke. I was left without a penny.

"Lady Agatha didn't know that when she came to my room after the show. I was so startled as she had been, at our resemblance. She told me this story about having to come clear from England to claim her inheritance. She said she was already fed up with the west, its dust, its heat, its hardships. She wanted to go back to New York. She suggested this idea of our changing identities so that she could go back incognito, while I came out here and lived on the ranch as Lady Agatha Ware long enough to fulfill the stipulation of Lord Basil's will. She was to pay me twenty-five thousand dollars at that time. She didn't actually look as much like me as the picture in the paper, but I touched her up a little before I left. I didn't have to change myself much because nobody out here had ever seen Lady Agatha, except Conrad, and that was years before."

Mitchell asked, "What about her maid? She had one, of course."

"Her maid was taken sick in Chicago and Lady Agatha hadn't been able to find one to suit her since. She spent most of the night briefing me upon what I should know. The present her uncle gave her was one of the things she didn't think about, I guess. I'd ridden enough so that we thought no one would notice the difference—but you did, didn't you?"

"I did think your style was pretty ragged." He found himself half-believing her. The warmth of her body against him, the scent of perfume rising from her hair, the desperate plea in her eyes, were so convincing, he had to force himself to pull away.

"And you snapped up the offer just like that, with no questions asked?"

"I knew it wouldn't be easy," she said tensely, "but you can't imagine how desperate I was, stranded, without a penny, a thousand miles from home. And even if I'd written home for money, grandma wouldn't have had any to send me. She's all I have left in the world."

"If you'd left that out, it might have almost convinced me," he said, sarcastically. He turned half away, staring out the door, trying to resolve this bitter confusion within him. "Who murdered Lady Agatha, then?" he said.

"I have no idea," she told him.

"But why should she be murdered?" he said. "Did she keep any of her jewelry? Did she mention knowing anyone in town?"

Agatha shook her head. "She gave me some of her jewels to make it look authentic. She didn't mention knowing anyone in town that I remember."

"What *can* you remember?" he said. "Isn't there anything else?"

She wrung her hands, frowning intensely, on the verge of crying again. "I'm trying to think. So much went on that night. It seems to me there was something—I can't remember, Hugh. I can't." She caught at his arm again, trying to come up against him once more. He blocked her off, held her back, afraid of what she could do to him.

"What did you do with the check Ashford gave you?" he asked.

"I sent it to the Riverview hotel in St. Louis," she cried. "Addressed to Denise Parker, just like we arranged."

Before he could speak again, there was the sound of horses in the driveway, and he turned to see the first guests arriving. He looked back down at the woman, torn by the emotions in him. He should think of her as Denise, now, he

knew. But somehow he couldn't. There was still that regal line to her neck, that aristocratic refinement to her face.

"You do believe me, don't you?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I can't. The whole thing's too crazy."

"Then why didn't you turn me in?" she said, a sob catching in her voice.

"I don't know," he said huskily. But he did know. It was what she did to him. If he were even completely sure that she had murdered the real Lady Agatha, could he turn her in? He thrust himself from her, shaken by the question, unable to answer it. He backed away, wanting to free himself of her effect.

"Do you think you can carry it off tonight?" he asked.

Her head lifted, hope shining in her eyes. "You'll give me a chance?"

"Ashford will be here tonight," he told her. "As a lawyer, he should have connections in St. Louis. Maybe he can get more information, turn up something that will prove your innocence."

BY the time they reached the manor-house, a long row of buggies and saddle horses lined the hitch racks under the cottonwoods. Mitchell followed Agatha across the wide porch and into the hallway, with its dark oak wainscoting and parquet floor. To the left stretched big double parlors with wine-red damask drapes at the French windows. The furniture had been shoved into the far end and small tables set along the sides. Here the guests laughed and talked as they drank the liquors brought them by the pretty Mexican serving-girl. In the middle of the cleared space several couples were dancing to the music of the stringed orchestra brought all the way from Austin.

As they stood there in the wide hall doorway, Ellis Ashford came towards them. "You're looking very lovely tonight, Lady Agatha," he said, making a courtly bow. "Now if you wish, I shall give myself the pleasure of presenting your guests to you."

Mitchell could not help but admire the way she handled it—the mixture of graciousness and hauteur she managed to put into her greeting of the ranchers and their wives and daughters; the cool, casual manner in which she accepted the offer of a dance from an overly-polite and barely sober Conrad.

Mitchell watched them whirl away, conscious of a strange new feeling pounding inside him. He rolled a cigarette to steady himself, trying not to follow them with his eyes. But they drew him irresistably—Conrad so tall and easy and handsome, and Denise, bent back over his arm in a lithe, graceful arc. He suddenly felt a vicious impulse to walk out and take her away from Conrad. A man wasn't jealous unless he was in love. In love with a murderess?

With a gutteral sound, he dropped his cigarette, grinding it angrily under his heel. He turned to seek Ellis Ashford in the crowd, and finally saw him talking to a pair of neighboring ranchers. When he caught the man's eye, Ashford excused himself, and came over to Mitchell.

"Have you seen the St. Louis papers?" Mitchell asked.

A strange expression tightened the lawyer's distinguished face. Then he began to chuckle, indulgently, and grasped Mitchell's arm. "So that was what had you so spooky this afternoon," he said. He sighed softly. "Such is youth. Jumping so hotly at conclusions."

"I'm not the only one who added it up," Mitchell said.

Ashford shook his head. "It's a terribly unfortunate coincidence, Hugh. I don't think it's anything more. Can you actually believe a woman capable of such a thing? This woman?"

Mitchell lowered his eyes, mouth compressed, and Ashford chuckled in that indulgent way again. "Of course not. Now you go out and dance with her and—"

Before he could finish there was a commotion at the door. Facing around, Mitchell saw Studs Kelly, swaying tipsily and arguing with one of the servants. Flanking him were Boa Snyder and Fayette Baxter, both flushed with drink. Ashford was the first to move, walking swiftly over to grasp Kelly's arm.

"Get out of here," he told the gambler,

in a low, tense voice. "You're drunk."

Kelly grinned. "You wouldn't be putting me out of my own house, would you, pop?" he asked.

Mitchell moved in close to Kelly. "Your own house?" he repeated grimly.

With Ashford still hanging to his arm, Kelly turned to Mitchell. "Well, now, why not?" he asked. "Conrad tells me the Lady Agatha ain't exactly taken with the country. Maybe she'll give me the place. I've always wanted the Broken Shield."

Ellis Ashford tugged at his arm. "Don't be a fool, Studs. She wouldn't desecrate Lord Basil's memory by turning it over to anyone like you. Now get out."

Kelly swept him casually aside. "The hell I will," he shouted. And before anyone suspected his intention, he had lunged out towards Conrad and Denise, where they stood near the center of the room. None of the guests made a move to stop him. Many of the ranchers were under Kelly's thumbs, through gambling debts, or dirt he had dug up off their back trails, and Mitchell knew he could expect little help from them if it came to a showdown. As for the Broken Shield crew, the bulk of them were still down at the bunkshacks, or out on the range. It left only a handful of frightened, useless Mexican servants.

Kelly grabbed Conrad's arm, swinging him away. "Off the floor, dandy. Let a man swing this gal."

"Stop it, Studs," Conrad cried. "You're drunk, you'll spoil everything—"

Kelly swept aside his pawing arm and put one hand against his chest, lunging heavily into the push. Conrad staggered backward into the guests, caroming off into Boa Snyder. Before he could pull away, Boa had tripped him, sending him sprawling on his face. And at the same time, Kelly grabbed Agatha and swung her around toward the orchestra.

"Strike up the music," he yelled hoarsely. "I want to romp and I want to stomp and I want to chase the rabbit—"

THE same unthinking rage swept Mitchell that had come when he saw Conrad with her in the barn. He stopped thinking of her as a murderess, an imposter. He plunged across the floor to hook one of Kelly's elbows as the man swung around, spinning him away from the woman. Off to his left, Mitchell saw Snyder following him out, going for a gun. Mitchell let Kelly spin on around till he was going toward Snyder, then released him. Kelly staggered back off-balance and went heavily into Snyder, knocking his feet from beneath him on the slick floor, so that they both went down with a heavy, thudding sound.

At the same time, Fayette Baxter burst from the crowd. For once in his life, he must have left his over-and-under gun on his horse, for he was unarmed. Mitchell tried to wheel and meet the man, but Baxter came lunging into him before he was clear around. It knocked Mitchell back into a heavy sideboard, with Baxter following Mitchell grappled him here, took a blow in the belly, hooked a leg behind the man's knee to trip him. Baxter would not let go and they both fell to the floor.

Mitchell struck on his side, stunning him and Baxter tried to roll on top, Mitchell lunged back the other way to block that, and it carried them into the heavy sideboard again, tilting it over. There was a great clattering crash as it fell over on top of them, spilling off the candelabra and silver service. Mitchell lay beneath the heavy piece of furniture for an instant, dazed by the blow of it against his head. Then he began to crawl out from beneath it. Only Baxter's legs were visible, the rest of him hidden by the sideboard. There was no movement from him, and Mitchell realized he must have been knocked out.

Then Mitchell saw that one of the candles had caught onto the draperies, and flames were licking up the wine-red damask. At the same instant, he saw Kelly coming at him from across the room, a drunken, twisted rage stamped into his heavy face. Boa Snyder was on his feet, too, and coming in behind Kelly. Not waiting to be pinned between them, Mitchell lunged towards Kelly. The man tried to halt and spread

his legs to set himself, but Mitchell went into him at a run, blocking aside one of his heavy blows and hitting him in the stomach. He carried Kelly with him back towards the stairs. They crashed into a newel post and its rounded surface spun Kelly around so fast that he fell face down onto the stairs. Before Mitchell could reach him, he rolled over on his back and scrambled upwards. Mitchell tried to catch his coat, his knee, but Kelly twisted away, gaining his feet on the third step. As Mitchell finally came into him again, Kelly's advantage of height gave him a chance to block Mitchell's blow and counter-punch, knocking Mitchell off to one side. He was kept from falling over onto the floor below by the banister. Panting, he twisted off this before Kelly could come down on him.

A sly, canny look crossed Kelly's face and he shifted his weight quickly, backing on up the stairs. The struggle had apparently cleared his head, for there was a bright, lucid glitter of rage in his eyes. Shaking his head dazedly, Mitchell followed him on up. He had almost reached Kelly, when the man gained the first landing, and grabbing a tall *jardinere* that stood on a pedestal in the corner, hurled it at Mitchell's head. All Mitchell could do was throw up his arm. It broke the blow. Half-blinded by the smashed China, Mitchell went on into Kelly, grappling him around the waist and twisting him in against the banister.

Kelly tried to bring a knee into Mitchell's groin, but Mitchell blocked it with his own knee and smashed Kelly in the face. This knocked the man heavily back against the banister. Mitchell hit him again in the stomach. The already weakened supports smashed and Kelly went on through, falling heavily to the floor below. Mitchell heard Denise cry out sharply from the smoke-filled room,

"Look out behind you, Hugh—Snyder—"

He wheeled, and saw Snyder running up the stairs, almost upon him. With his upper body twisted around towards the banister, he was in no position to block Snyder with his arms. All he could do was lash out with his foot. It carried him off-balance, and he was falling in the same instant that his kick caught Snyder square in the belly. The man folded over his boot like a closed jackknife, then pitched backward and flopped helplessly over and over to the foot of the stairs.

LYING there on his stomach on the landing, with his head hanging over the edge, Mitchell saw Kelly rising groggily from the debris of the banister and the floor below. Mitchell rose to his hands and knees and dropped onto Kelly from the landing, carrying the big man once more to the floor with the weight of his body. His fall was partly broken by Kelly's body, but it still dazed him almost as much as it did Kelly, and he was unable to get a hold on the man before Kelly reeled away from him. Kelly gained his feet with a stupid, beaten look on his face. Mitchell got to his own feet with great effort, gasping, hardly able to stand.

"You still think it's going to be your own house, or are you going to get out?" Mitchell asked.

"You're the one that's getting out," Kelly shouted.

Mitchell was too groggy to shift away in time, and Kelly's blow caught him on the side of the head, knocking him back against the wall beneath the stairway. Dimly, Mitchell saw Kelly coming on in, aiming the next blow at his belly. With a gasp, he twisted around in a quick jerk, so that his face was turned in flat against the wall. He heard Kelly's scream of pain, as the man's first went into the wall where he had been the instant before, then Mitchell twisted back and caught Kelly's arm, throwing him around. Incapacitated by the pain of his smashed hand, Kelly did not have the coordination to cover himself and the swinging motion threw his arms out wide, leaving his whole body open.

With all his weight, Mitchell went into the man, slugging for that square, beefy belly. Kelly grunted sickly, staggering backwards. Mitchell followed him, hitting

him again. Kelly gasped, refusing to go down, brutal face twisted with the effort of maintaining his feet, as he staggered on back. Mitchell followed him still, so exhausted by now that he could hardly see the man, keeping himself right up against Kelly's belly, so his blows would not miss. He did not know how many times he had slugged, had no conception of how far they had gone, staggering across the smoky room, until there was a brittle crash, and he saw Kelly going through the French window that led out onto the front porch, in a splatter of broken glass.

Through a thick haze, Mitchell felt someone catch at his arm and cry, Hugh —please—that's enough. You'll kill him. He's through."

He shrugged off the restraining hand, driven by bestial, primal urges so deep he could not identify them, and went on through the broken window after Kelly, ripping his shirt and slashing his hands and face. The big man had come to his hands and knees, blood dripping from his shaggy head onto the porch, unable to rise further. Mitchell reached him and bending down to grab for his coat, almost pitched over, himself. Then with a great, gasping breath, he heaved the man upward and backward.

Kelly pawed feebly, impotently, at him, and with the last of his strength, Mitchell threw his shoulder against the gambler, heaving him over the waist-high porch rail to fall heavily, soddenly, on the ground below. Mitchell grabbed at the rail to keep himself from falling after Kelly. Leaning the whole weight of his body against it, he dragged in a great, sucking gasp of air and panted, in a voice he hardly recognized as his own, "*Now* get up. *Now* get up."

Kelly lay motionless upon the earth, and at last Mitchell turned away, vaguely conscious that the men had put out the fire, and that someone was picking his way carefully through the broken window. Then Ellis Ashford stood beside him. "If he had any doubts about whom this house belonged to," he said, looking speculatively over the rail at Kelly, "I guess he knows now."

IV

THE day after the fight, Mitchell awoke, feeling stiff and sore. From the kitchen, on the other side of the dog-run, he heard the clatter of pots and pans. He rolled over with difficulty and looked about him. The other bunks were empty and he realized the men had let him sleep late.

He rose with a groan, rubbing dismally at his bruises, memory of what had happened the night before filtering his mind as he dressed. Boa Snyder and Fayette Baxter had put Studs Kelly on his horse after the man had regained consciousness, and Kelly had left, barely able to stay in the saddle and too groggy even for speech. One by one, the guests had left in an embarrassed, furtive way. Afterwards, Ashford and a couple of the Broken Shield crew, had helped Mitchell to the bunkhouse and doctored his wounds. He had pieced this much together when the cook's strident voice came to him from the kitchen. "Wake up, Mitchell," he yelled. "Sheriff's here. Just went into the house."

"All right," Mitchell answered. He stood a moment, sliding a tongue over his dry lips. Then he walked out the door and up the path to the manor-house, moving slowly, painfully, the hot noonday sun hurting his eyes.

A long-legged roan was hitched to the rack in front of the house, blowing like it had been ridden hard. Frowning, Mitchell climbed the front steps, and swung open the door.

The interior was a shambles, with soot from the burned drapery dirtying the delicate satin upholstery of the chairs and couches that had been shoved to one end for the party. Pieces of the wrecked banister were strung half-way across the scratched and dented *parquet* floor; the sideboard still lay face down in a far corner and the broken French window sagged open.

Just inside the door, Sheriff Glen Leeds stood talking with Conrad Ware. Leeds was a tall, dour man, dressed in a black broadcloth suit whitened by alkali and wear, the right tail of its clawham-

mer coat pulled higher than the left by the bulge of his gun.

"Hate to bust in on you after the night you had," he told Mitchell. "But I got a warrant for the woman passing herself off as Lady Agatha. Young Ware tells me you know the details. St. Louis police want her arrested on suspicion of murder. They've found some gold alloy in the wound in the dead woman's head. Looks like some ornament chipped off the murder weapon. A lot of other new evidence makes it a pretty tight case."

Mitchell felt the blood drain from his face, but before he could find words, young Ware grinned sardonically.

"Perhaps you shouldn't take Mitchell so completely into your confidence, Sheriff. The lady's charms have had a great effect on him. Remember, he found out about this yesterday, and didn't contact you about it, one way or another."

Leeds squinted pale, humorless eyes at Mitchell. "That so? I didn't know you were that susceptible to the gals, Hugh. Maybe you better come along to town with me, after I get the woman."

"She's probably still upstairs," Conrad told him.

"No, she ain't," came the querulous, raucous voice of the housekeeper, and they turned to see the gaunt, rawboned, back-brush woman standing in the doorway, suspicion hardening her narrow, roughened face. "She must have seen you comin' through the brush from her upstairs window, Sheriff. She went out the back way and got a horse about ten minutes ago. If I'd known it was you she was runnin' from I would have tried to stop her."

Leeds wheeled from Mitchell to Conrad. Then a tight, surprised suspicion settled into his face, and he said. "Saddle your horses, both of you. We'll go after her together. She can't get far in this brush."

It took them but a few minutes to throw the saddles on their mounts, with Mitchell hardly able to contain himself under Conrad's sarcasm. Yet he knew that half his anger was at himself, for trusting Denise.

They circled the ranch till they picked up her trail where she had made a big hole, tearing through the mesquite southward. It was a sign a greenhorn could have followed, running through the brush for a mile—mesquite berries whipped off their branches to lie scattered across the trail, small branches of black chaparral broken and hanging, great gaps trampled out of thin whitebrush. But when they reached the first water, it halted them. Either by accident, or by design, Denise had turned down this shallow, brackish stream, for there was no trace of her exit on the other side, where it would have been had she ridden across.

"She won't have enough sense to ride it far," Leeds said, sharply. "Ware, you head upstream. Mitchell and I'll go down. Yell if you find sign."

With a mocking grin at Mitchell, Conrad turned away. Mitchell followed Leeds as the man splashed through the shallows in the other direction. But he knew the sheriff would find no sign in this direction. He had been watching the general direction of Denise's trail, and had finally decided it was heading towards the dry wash of Rio Blanca, where they had first come across Boa Snyder and Fayette Baxter inspecting the beef. That meant she would head on down the wash to the trail leading into the old Spanish Fort.

And if she were heading in that direction, she would have turned downstream. That would leave it up to Conrad. Mitchell had little faith that Conrad would be able to find where she had left the stream. Then Mitchell realized that there was no impulse within him to tell Leeds this. He tried to define why, and could not. He only knew that he had to reach Denise—and alone.

THEY reached a turn in the stream. Leeds was intent on the banks, and wheeled past the curve, cut off, in that instant, from Mitchell, by an overhanging postoak. Mitchell wheeled his Copperbottom back and splashed across the water, spotting a hole in the fringing brush, and plunging through it.

"Mitchell," he heard Leeds call. "Come back here—"

But he was already hitting the brush at a dead run. Leeds was a brush country man, but he had not actually worked cattle in many years and his horse could not match the Copperbottom. Mitchell could not hear the crash of brush behind him over the great clatter he himself made. Dodging, running, ducking, he tore through the thorny, malignant thickets, eyes wide open, swinging off on one side and then the other to avoid a bunch of clawing retama or keep from being swept off by an oak branch. At last, he pulled up. He could not hear Leeds behind him, and knew he had outdistanced the man. He turned the stud horse and headed for Rio Blanca. He reached it by noon, soggy with sweat in the brazen heat. He rode the sandy wash till he found the blackened pair of postoaks, turned in here, picked up the trail to the fort. Now he could see her sign again, but he did not bother following it.

Then the crumbled, ancient walls of the fort were visible, rising from the brush ahead. He pulled up a moment at one of the gates, muttered angrily, and drove his Copperbottom on through. He saw hoof-pocks in the dusty floor here, leading through a door into a long, roofless hallway. He rode beneath one blackened beam, staring through a door on one side into an empty room. Finally he halted, and called.

"Denise. I know you're here. It's Hugh. You might as well show yourself. I'll find you sooner or later."

There was a moment of silence. Then he heard the snort of a horse, farther down the hall, and she stepped out of a doorway. He rode up to her, staring down into her pale, tear-stained face.

"What did you think you could gain by coming out here?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know! I just saw the sheriff coming and knew he was after me. I got panicky, I guess. You said nobody else knew about this place. It was the first thing I thought of. I . . . I . . ."

She bowed her head, shoulders trembling, small, wracked sobs coming from her. He swung off his horse, catching her elbows.

"I'm a fool for doing this," he said. "I should have turned you in at first."

She turned her face up to him, coming in against him, swallowing hard. "You'll help me, Hugh? You'll believe me? I didn't do it, I swear I didn't."

"We've got to have proof of that," he said, "Just your saying so isn't enough. You said before there was something you couldn't think of. Have you remembered it? This is your last chance, Denise."

A small, fugitive expression passed through her eyes, and she turned her head down, as if to hide it. "I have remembered something," she said, in a small, muffled voice. "I went with the real Lady Agatha about three that morning, to her room, to get some of her clothes and a few jewels. As I left, with her bags, I saw a man coming down the hall. It was from the rear stairway. I was still dressed in my own clothes, and I got only a glimpse of him in the dark hall. I couldn't see his face or anything."

"Did he go into Lady Agatha's room?"

"I didn't wait to see."

"Wasn't there anything to distinguish him?"

"I told you it was dark."

"But a hat, a coat, shoes. Something that you can remember."

"A cane."

"What kind of a cane?"

"How do I know, how do I know—" she was almost on the verge of crying.

"Leeds said they'd found some chips of gold alloy in the murdered woman's wound. Could it have been a gold-headed cane?"

She looked up in a wild eagerness. "Yes, that was it. A gold-headed cane. I remember now. There was just enough light to glint on it."

"If there was enough light to glint on it, you must have seen his face."

"No, I told you I couldn't. His hat must have cast that into shadow or something. Only a cloak, a long cloak, and a gold-headed cane. That was it."

He moved back a little, afraid, once

more, of the insidious effect her beauty had on him. "Conrad has a gold-headed cane," he said, slowly.

Her eyes widened. "Does he?"

"You know he does. He tried to hit you with it in the barn. Damn it—" he stepped clear back from her, torn bitterly again by those two conflicting emotions in him, the terrible, gnawing suspicion, and his desire for her. "You are an actress, aren't you? But every time you overplay it. Like that final touch about your grandmother being the only one you have left in the world. And now you don't remember about Conrad's cane."

"But I didn't, Hugh. You can't know how crazy this has driven me. I can't think straight any more at all. I'm trapped, can't you understand that, I'm completely trapped, with no way out. How would you feel? Could you remember all the little details of your life over the past weeks? Please, Hugh, you've got to believe me."

A desperate look shone in her eyes. "If Conrad is connected with this, we could find out. If he murdered her, and he thought I had something that would prove it, he'd come after me. If he were capable of killing his own cousin, he'd be capable of killing me. Where will he be now, Hugh? Where can you reach him?"

"If he and Leeds can't trail me, Conrad will more than likely head back into town and get drunk at Kelly's place. That's where he spends most of his time," Mitchell said, eyes narrowing.

"Can't you go there, then? Drop some kind of word that I've got proof he killed Agatha. A letter, news from the St. Louis police, anything. Let him find out where I am, and how to get here."

His narrowed eyes studied her face closely, almost desperately. "So he can try and kill you?" he asked. "That's a heck of a set-up."

"You can follow him," she said. "He'll talk. If he killed Lady Agatha, I can get it out of him. Please, Hugh, give me this chance."

He stared down at her deep breasts, rising and falling heavily with her breathing, the satiny texture of the flesh forming the soft, pale curve of her cheek, the ripe, red fullness of her lips. The stunning, compelling beauty of her seemed to suck him in, like a vortex. But it wasn't strong enough in this moment, to drown his suspicion.

"So neat," he said, in a hard voice. "Always so nice and neat. Did you figure it out that way when you killed Lady Agatha, too?"

A startled, shocked expression leaped into her eyes. "Hugh!"

"That's right," he said. "I'm not convinced."

"Hugh," she said, again. Only it was throaty, now. Her lids dropped over her eyes till they had a smoky, provocative look, and she moved in against him once more, and he could not stop her. Soft arms were about his neck, the warm fullness of a body glued to him, those ripe lips meeting his.

When it was finally over, she pulled back, staring up at him with heavy-lidded eyes. When she saw what was in his face, she said, "Now, whether you believe me or not, you have to go, don't you?"

The blood was so thick in his throat he could hardly speak. Finally it left him, strained and guttural. "Yes," he said. "I do."

V

IT was late afternoon before Mitchell reached Red Wheel. He did not see Conrad's horse at the rack before the Aces and Eights, but he went inside anyway, and started to drink. He bought a bottle and took it to a table so nobody would actually know how much he took on. The tension in him built higher as time dragged on. He knew he would be in a tight fix if Sheriff Leeds were the first to hit town. He slackened in the chair, put a bleary, sleepy look onto his face, pretended to get successively drunker.

There were only a few men at the bar, and they took little notice of him. Fayette Baxter came in, after a while; he halted by the stairs, watching Mitchell narrowly, then went upstairs and into Studs

Kelly's office. Then another man came through the door.

It was Ellis Ashford. He looked around the big room till his eyes lit on Mitchell, and he came over that way, dropping into a chair at the table.

"What's the matter, Hugh?" he asked. "Have you gone completely crazy? Leeds just hit town. He says you helped Denise Parker escape. You can't stay here. He wants to arrest you."

Mitchell knew he had to act out his part even for this man, and he wobbled his head drunkenly. "Helped her escape! I wouldn't help her take a drink if she were dying of thirst."

Ashford leaned forward, grasping Mitchell's arm, genuine concern in his face. "What is it, Hugh? Was I wrong about her? Do you honestly think she's capable of something like that."

"Capable, hades," muttered Mitchell. "She'd stick a knife in your back as quick as that."

He saw Conrad Ware swing through the batwings, powdered with alkali, a mushed, angry look on his face. The man walked halfway to the stairs before his hot glance fell on Mitchell; then he halted in surprise, and finally turned to come that way. Mitchell filled his glass, tossed off a quarter of it, eyes watering at the fiery burn of the rot-gut.

"So you didn't find her," Conrad said, halting above Mitchell.

"No," Mitchell slurred. "Didn' fin' her."

Conrad's lips compressed tightly. "You're lying. You know where she is. You're in love with her."

"Who could love that murdering, pig-sticking wench," Mitchell said, bitterly.

Conrad grabbed his shoulders, long fingers digging into the muscle. "What happened?"

"You wouldn't be so bitter if nothing had happened," Conrad told him sharply. "You found her out there. That's what happened. You tried to make love to her and she wouldn't have it. You let her get away. That's it, isn't it?"

"Didn't let her go," Mitchell said. "She'll never get out of the brush alive. Maybe she found her way into the Spanish Fort. She'll never get out."

"Spanish Fort?" Conrad asked. "What Spanish Fort?"

"I'm not telling anybody," Mitchell muttered, taking another drink. "I don't care if she does have proof."

A changed, sharpened look entered Conrad's face, and he sat down, staring at Mitchell. "Proof of what?"

"Of who killed Lady Agatha." Mitchell laughed drunkenly. "That's funny. *She* killed Lady Agatha."

"Did she?" Conrad asked, in a strange voice. He leaned forward catching Mitchell's arm. "What kind of proof."

"I dunno. A letter, or something." Mitchell raised up abruptly, staring at Conrad. "Why should I tell you anyway?"

"You have no reason to shield her any longer," Conrad said. "She's played you along and used you and incriminated you till the sheriff is ready to arrest you as an accessory after the fact. You don't owe her anything. Maybe she can find her way out of the Spanish Fort. She can't get through Dirk Thickets."

"Isn't the Dirk Thickets," Mitchell mumbled. "It's down that old cut-off of the Chihuahua trail into the bottoms of that dried up creek the Indians used to get their sotol stalks from."

"Rio Blanca? That doesn't lead anywhere," Ware said, frowning. "It comes right up against the Comanche Thickets and nobody's ever gotten through there."

"There's an old Indian trail through the thickets nobody else knows," Mitchell said. "You can find the opening between a pair of burned postoaks."

"And then what?" An eager look filled Conrad's eyes.

"Nothing," Mitchell muttered. "I ain't telling anybody how to get there."

A cunning light filled Conrad's eyes; he masked that, and shrugged. "You don't have to. Anybody knows that trail. After the burned postoaks, it's another dry wash."

"Blazes it is," Mitchell growled.

"Have another drink," Conrad said, pouring Mitchell's glass full once more.

Ashford put his hand on Conrad's arm. "You haven't got any right to do this, Conrad—"

"Stay out of this, you old shyster," Conrad snarled, wheeling on him, a whipped, raging look stamped into his narrow, handsome face. Ashford stiffened in his chair, blood draining from his cheeks. Then he stood abruptly, trembling.

"You shouldn't have said that. I think I'd better go get Sheriff Leeds."

He wheeled and stalked out. Mitchell watched him go, trying to hide the tension in him, knowing there were only a few moments left, now. Conrad turned back, that same knowledge in his face.

"You're so drunk you couldn't find your own way back in there," he said.

"Sure could." Mitchell let his head wobble, as if approaching a drunken stupor, a silly grin fixed onto his face. "After the burned postoaks, it's a black chaparral shaped like a cross. Cut east to a pile of buffalo skulls. Indians put 'em there. From there whitebrush grows right down the line to the fort."

CONRAD whipped up and out of his chair even before Mitchell was finished. Mitchell sat slack, watching him go through the batwings, listening to the abrupt stamp of his horse, then the muffled thump of hooves breaking swiftly into a galloping tattoo. After a moment, he rose also, wandering drunkenly to the door, almost falling over another chair. He went out and pretended to have great difficulty untying his horse. He climbed heavily aboard. As the animal swung out into the street with him, he saw the light go out in Kelly's office. Then he caught sight of Leeds coming up the main street towards the plaza, from the sheriff's office.

He wheeled the horse towards the other side of the plaza and broke down that way through the dusk mantling the town. A barking dog ran across before him. He approached a frame store, with an alleyway between it and the next adobe structure. As he crossed the front of the store, the shot smashed at him.

The Copperbottom reeled up, screaming insanely with pain. Mitchell kicked free of the saddle and let himself fall as the horse plunged onward, weaving, sunfishing, finally veering wildly across the street to smash through a spindle fence and go headlong against the wall of an adobe house.

Mitchell hit the earth hard, rolling off it till the curb before the store halted him. Gasping, he came dazedly to hands and knees. The shot must have come from the opposite side of the street, for he had felt the jerk of the horse against his right leg. He was completely exposed here, though the thick dusk obscured him somewhat.

He got to his feet, lunging for the alley. Another shot filled the twilight behind him. The bullet smashed into the curb where he had just crouched. He plunged into the sanctuary of the alley, flattening against the siding of the store. He stood glued here, getting his gun out, searching the opposite side of the street for movement. There were loud, frightened voices within the house over there. A light winked on, turning a window into a yellow rectangle, then blinked off again. A man came hesitantly from a doorway, staring at the dead Copperbottom where it lay twisted at the foot of the smashed wall.

"Come back in, Tirado, you fool," a woman squalled, and the man turned back through the door.

A baby began to bawl. The hound started barking again. Mitchell could see nothing else over there, and began to sidle along the wall till he reached the end of the alley. Then he ran down behind the houses for a full block, and reached a winding lane they called a street. It led back to the main avenue out of town, and he cut down it till he reached the broad, rutted way once more. He halted here, by a willow fence, and finally decided that it was dark enough to chance it. He cut across the street, ducking down behind another fence on the other side. Chickens set up a frightened cackling. He went on, till he found the alley running behind the houses.

Turning back towards the plaza, he moved carefully. There were willows and postoaks here, and he took their cover,

slinking behind a spindle fence, moving between two sheds. There was a corral ahead, filled with the muffled snorting and trotting of an excited horse. He guessed he was near the spot where the shots had come from, now.

He could hear once more the muffled, frightened voices from within the adobe hovels. This was the Mexican district, and they had seen enough trouble in this country to know the wisdom of remaining inside. He passed the corral, reaching a gnarled postoak. He stood up against the trunk of the tree, breathing softly, waiting. Finally, he saw slight movement up by one of the ancient, two-wheeled *carretas* the Mexicans used for wagons. The cart stood behind a pair of houses, and from the passageway between these adobe structures, Mitchell judged a man could see the store building across the street. That would be the spot, then.

The man appeared suddenly. He made a cat-like shadow, slightly darker than the dusk, a lean, tense, bow-legged form, holding a rifle. That rifle stamped him for Mitchell.

"Here I am, Fayette," he called, softly.

Fayette Baxter wheeled, the over-and-under swinging around. The guns made a smashing detonation against the thick dusk. Baxter had not gotten turned completely toward Mitchell. The bullet went crashing into a wall ten feet to Mitchell's left. Baxter's body seemed to lift up as Mitchell's bullet struck him. A great gust of air left him, and he hung there a moment. Then the rifle left his hands and he pitched forward on his face.

Mitchell ran toward him in a crouching run, squatting down beside the *carreta*. Ahead of him, sprawled face down with the dust settling mordantly back around his body, Baxter lay moveless. No breathing stirred his body. Nothing else made sound in the night, for the next few moments. Even the people in those houses were silent, listening. Then a woman began to sob, and called upon all the saints, that she had never sinned, why was this terror brought to her house?

MITCHELL moved at last, convinced that no one else was here, crossing the alley to that corral. He found a rawhide line slung on the top pole, and ducked between the poles. He cornered the fretting, snorting animal and slung the rawhide on its jaw, in a hackamore. It was not much of horse, a weedy, hairy little brush-bronc, but it was the best he could do, in the tension of realizing how time was running out, with Conrad so far ahead of him. He lowered the bars of the gate, and led the animal out. Then he swung aboard and booted its flanks.

He galloped down the alley to the lane, down the lane to the main road from town, out this into the brush. It was dark night when he reached Rio Blanca, but the moon had started to rise by the time he found those blackened postoaks. He had pushed the animal unmercifully, and the poor beast was stumbling and wheezing as they turned out of the wash into the trail.

He did not bother to follow the meandering path. He burst his way straight through the thickets, smashing through the white-brush, tearing great holes in the chaparral. The moon was high, casting weird shadows through the brush by the time he came within sight of those bleached buffalo skulls. It was here that the horse died. It balked, and halted, refusing to go on, and stood there, beginning to shudder heavily beneath him.

Mitchell swung off, stood there a moment, a bitter recrimination filling him. He had never run a horse to death before. He wanted to shoot it, put it out of its misery. He knew that would give him away, however. Before he could decide, the animal gave a great, hoarse sigh, and went to its fore knees. Then it flopped over on its side, and died.

Mitchell turned and ran the rest of the way. Torn and bleeding from the wild ride through the thickets, chest heaving with the effort of dragging in air, he came within sight of the fort. He dropped to a knee here, vision swimming, drained, in that moment, by the run. Then his eyes found Conrad's horse, one of Lord Basil's big bay jumpers, hitched to a *coma* tree. And beyond that, Conrad,

clearly recognizable under a risen moon, lying in a silent, inert heap, near the doorway to the fort.

Mitchell pulled his gun again, remembering he had forgotten to reload it, back in town. He jacked out the empties, shoved in fresh shells. Then he darted to the protection of the wall, walking in a crouched, tense way to where Conrad lay. The man's head had been smashed in. He was dead.

Mitchell stood there, back against the wall, a deep, sick feeling pervading him as he realized what this meant. Yet, even realizing it, there was a part of him that still refused to believe it. How could she have such an appalling influence over him? It was so obvious what had happened, so obvious how she had implicated him in this, until he could not turn her in without incriminating himself.

He saw what a position it put him in. There was even a witness to how he had lured Conrad out here. Ashford had heard the whole thing. It made Mitchell an accomplice in Conrad's murder. Not only Conrad's. The real Lady Agatha's.

The devilish cleverness of it struck him like a blow. What a fool he had been. And she thought she had won, now? She thought she had time tied up so completely that he would do whatever she wished? *Not this time, damn you!*

Face set, he wheeled and walked in through the door, into the first great chamber. This had once been the parade ground of the fort. Moonlight washed the hard-packed earth, sought out the far corners, dribbled through the crumbling holes in the wall.

He reached the door into the first buildings. Much of the roofing had fallen in, leaving blackened beams here and there to cast long fingers of shadows over the open spaces. The narrow hall was a well of darkness, with startling spots of light here and there where a gap or a fallen section of wall allowed it through. He moved slowly down the hall, listening for sounds, sweat from his palm greasing the butt of his gun. He heard a snorting sound ahead. Her horse.

He moved on, through a shaft of light falling through a doorway, into the cottony blackness beyond. Then he made out the animal, standing forlornly in the middle of the hall, reins trailing. Approaching it, he saw that it was not Denise's bay. He ran his hand over its hot body, finding lather between the forelegs. He could not place the animal. It looked like a leggy roan, with a white patch on its head. Had Leeds gotten another horse and beaten him here?

THEN, far down the passage, there was a rattling sound, as if shale had dribbled from a wall. After this, a soft scurrying, like the movements of rats. Then a voice, startling him.

"Denise, you might as well come out. You can't get away."

"I won't," the woman answered. "You can't make me. Get away, get out—"

The walls muffled both voices. Mitchell could recognize Denise's by its feminine sound. The other was not clear to him. He moved down that way faster, pulses pounding. Again that scurrying sound, a sudden crash, then Denise screamed.

"Stop it, let me go, you fool, let me go—"

"Not this time, my dear. You've come to the end of the game."

Mitchell broke into a run down the hall. The sounds of struggle ahead covered his own noises. There was a guttural, grunting sound, the acrid, rustling shift of feet against the earth, a gasp from Denise.

"Please, please, you're hurting me."

Mitchell reached the end of a hall, saw them in the huge chamber it opened into. It was like a picture, static and vivid before him in that last moment. Ellis Ashford held Denise up against the wall with his long, lanky body, one arm across her throat. His other was back over his head, holding a cane. Its gold head glittered in the moonlight.

"Drop it, Ashford," Mitchell shouted.

The lawyer wheeled, gaping at him. In this same moment, there was a clattering, crashing sound from the other end of the hall, and Mitchell half-turned to see Studs Kelly and Boa Snyder ride headlong through the gate.

With Ashford's attention on Mitchell,

for that moment, it gave Denise a chance to twist away from the lawyer and dart across the room to a further door.

"Ashford," Kelly bellowed, hauling up in the outer courtyard. "You here?"

"Back here," Ashford yelled, wheeling to run after the girl. "Mitchell's in the hall. Hurry up, Studs."

Kelly put the spurs to his horse and plunged across the courtyard into the hall, with Boa Snyder behind him, opening fire immediately. The bullets kicked at the ground and chipped adobe off the walls, frightening Ashford's roan so that it whinneyed wildly and ran on in towards Mitchell.

With all three horses threatening to ride him down, the bullets slamming into the adobe walls about him, Mitchell took one shot before he flung himself into the door. He saw Boa Snyder throw up his arms and pitch off the back of his horse, and then that was blocked off from him, as he jumped behind the wall. The room was empty, and he wheeled to run for the door Denise and Ashford had disappeared into. As he reached this, he heard the horses clatter through the hall opposite the other door, with the adobe walls shaking as the animals bumped against them, and Kelly's hoarse curse. Saddle leather creaked, and the man appeared at the other door just as Mitchell ran through.

Kelly threw a shot that chipped wood from the door frame behind Mitchell. Then the wall blocked off Mitchell. He found himself in a narrower hallway, some of the roof still remaining here to leave it completely shadowed, leading on back into a maze of rooms beyond.

Without understanding it fully, yet, he knew a great, sick fear for Denise. Ignoring Kelly's threat behind him, he turned down the narrow hall, feeling his way along it till he reached a turn. He moved around this, and ahead of him saw that the roof had fallen in, leaving a length of the rubble-filled passage brilliantly lighted. From behind this lighted portion came a rustling sound. At the same time, Kelly's voice boomed out behind Mitchell.

"Ashford, damn you, where are you? I ain't going to play cat and mouse like this all night."

His voice formed a few muffled echoes that played back and forth within the ghostly chambers, to die, at last, and leave that black well of silence. Mitchell's shirt was clinging to his back now, sticky with sweat. Again, he heard that rustling sound in front of him, like the shift of clothing against a stealthily moving body. But it did not seem to be actually within the hall. Then there was a crunching sound. Repeated. Like footsteps in that rubble of fallen ceiling.

Mitchell was about to shift forward, when he heard another noise behind him. This was heavier, a repeated crunching sound, clearly recognizable as footsteps back around that turn. It would be Kelly, then, coming in behind him.

Suddenly, from the shadows staining the other end of the hall he heard the sudden burst of running feet, a sharp feminine gasp, and Ashford's vindictive voice.

"All right, you little vixen—"

Mitchell knew Kelly would be around that corner in the next instant, and that he would expose himself to the man's murderous fire if he ran into that lighted section of the hall. Yet, he also knew he had only that next instant in which to save Denise.

With a deep, gasping breath, he broke into a run. As soon as he reached the moonlit section, there was a blasting shot, chipping adobe off into his face. He wheeled, firing at the blast of that shot. Right after his own detonation, he heard the sound of running feet behind him. There was a second cherry-red blast from back there, but it was pointed at the ground, kicking earth up five feet behind Mitchell. He fired at this, again and again, still running, himself, in a twisted, backward way, until his gun was empty. As he reached the end of the patch of moonlight, and plunged into the blackness beyond, Studs Kelly came into it from those other shadows.

He was just about through running. He held his gun, but it was pointed at the ground. He veered from side to side, plunging first into the left wall, then the

right. Finally, halfway through the moonlight, he rammed into the wall again, with his shoulder, and stopped, and sagged there a moment. Then he began to slide down into a sitting position, the whole front of him covered with blood.

Mitchell whirled, still holding his empty gun, and flung himself through the doorway at the end of the hall. Across the chamber here, Denise lay twisted against the wall, face pale and contorted, as she gripped the gold-headed cane with both hands. She must have blocked Ashford's first blow, and caught the cane, for he was down on one knee over her, trying desperately to tear the cane free. He twisted it loose from her hands just as they both caught sight of Mitchell. Ashford came up to his feet in a twisting motion.

Mitchell was running so hard he could not stop himself, and went heavily into Ashford, carrying the man back against the wall. Face twisted in rage, Ashford swung the cane out in a wide arc that brought the end against the back of Mitchell's head. It knocked Mitchell partly aside. Stunned by the blow, he tried to use his empty gun to whip Ashford. Ashford jumped back and knocked the gun from his hand with another blow of the cane.

Mitchell went into the man once more. He grappled Ashford, trying to bull him back off-balance. Ashford shifted his weight, jabbing Mitchell in the groin with the point of the cane. Surprised at the man's vicious strength, sickened by the stab at his groin, Mitchell dropped to his knees. With a triumphant curse, Ashford raised the cane to strike his head.

But Mitchell got both arms about the man's legs, scissoring them, and put all his weight against Ashford. The lawyer was going over backward when his cane struck, weakening the blow. Mitchell sprawled up on top of him, striking at his face.

Ashford jerked away from the blow. Mitchell caught the cane with one hand, as Ashford tried to lift it, struck again with his other fist, again. His third blow found the man's face fully. Ashford groaned, went limp beneath him.

Slowly, dazedly, Mitchell got to his feet, turned to Denise. She was still huddled against the wall, staring white-faced at Ashford. He moved over wordlessly to help her up. She stood against him a long time, trembling. When he felt she had pulled herself together, he asked:

"It was Ashford who killed Conrad, then?"

"Conrad?" Her eyes turned up, startled.

"Yes," Mitchell nodded. "Conrad's dead outside. His head mashed in."

"I didn't know that," she said. "I heard someone coming into the fort. I thought it was you." She shook her head, eyes blank with wonder. "It was Ashford who killed the real Lady Agatha, then?"

"Looks like it," Mitchell muttered. "But why?"

"Money. What other reason is there?" Studs Kelly said, from where he sat in the hallway.

Mitchell wheeled towards him, took an impulsive step in that direction. "You'd better not talk, Kelly."

The man sat with his head sunk onto his chest, eyes closed, a twisted, contemptuous expression on his lips. "Why not? I'm at the end of this dally. Ashford figured we could get the whole inheritance if he worked it right. Before that time, I wouldn't give Conrad any credit because I knew he wasn't going to inherit anything. Then Ashford came to me and suggested that if Conrad piled up enough gambling debts, and something were to happen to Lady Agatha, I could claim the inheritance as payment of the debts."

"That's why your men were looking over the Broken Shield cattle?"

Kelly laughed, choked up blood. "I'm a business man," he said, finally, squinting hard in pain. "I like to see what I'm getting for my money."

"Then Ashford was the man who killed the real Lady Agatha?"

"Yeah," Kelly said. "He had every angle figured. He even used a gold-headed

cane so it would be blamed on Conrad if anything went wrong."

"He didn't figure one angle," Mitchell said.

"The actress?" Kelly coughed weakly. "You can imagine what that did to the old shyster, when she showed up here and everybody took her for the real article. I had to admire her. I almost hated to break up her little game."

"Why did Ashford kill Conrad?" Mitchell asked.

"Conrad began to suspect what kind of deal we were pulling when the real Lady Agatha was murdered. When this actress showed up, he thought she was working with us, to prevent him from inheriting the estate on the death of the only other heir."

"Then he must have suspected Ashford of Lady Agatha's murder, and thought the proof I said this woman had would incriminate Ashford," said Mitchell. "That's why he came here."

The gambler did not answer. His head had fallen forward on his chest. With a small sobbing sound, Denise turned her face in against Mitchell. He was still holding her when Sheriff Leeds stepped into the moonlit section of the hall, and halted, gun in hand. He took in the whole scene before he spoke.

"I heard the last of what Kelly said," he murmured, finally. "Ashford is the one I'll ship back to St. Louis, then."

"That's right," answered Mitchell. "He and Kelly were splitting on the deal."

"I followed Kelly out here," Leeds said, holstering his gun. "He must have been following you. Boa's out there with a bullet in the leg. I ain't seen so much carnage since—"

"Will you take over?" Mitchell broke in. "I'd like to get her out of this."

Leeds pursed his lips, nodded. Mitchell kept himself between the woman and Kelly's body, as they passed, going down the narrow, black hall and through the door into the chamber, mottled with yellow moonlight. Here they halted a moment, while the woman leaned against him, gathering herself.

"It'll be hard to think of you as anything but Agatha, after all this," he told her. Then he tilted her chin up. "I was always bothered by that mixture of hot and cold in you. The cold was when you were trying to act like Lady Agatha, wasn't it?" She nodded, in mute answer, and he added, "And it was Lady Agatha who didn't like the country."

"Yes," she said, fiercely. "I tried to act towards it the way I thought Agatha would. But Denise Parker loves the country. She'd do anything to stay."

"Would she marry the ex-ramrod of the broken Shield who is going into business for himself after they settle the estate?"

Her eyes darkened. "This is an awful place to talk about it." Then a tremulous smile lit her face. "But I'd say yes to that anywhere, Hugh."

He gathered her into his arms, no longer torn by what she did to him, no longer afraid of it. "I'll give you a chance to say it in a much better place than this," he smiled.

♥ ♥ ♥ LETTERS OF ROMANCE ♥ ♥ ♥

Finding it tough to lasso your man? He won't slip through your loop so easily if you know the ropes about love! Read these letters from our readers and learn from the heartfelt problems of others!

WHY LABEL LOVE?

Dear Editors: I have been going steady with a boy for almost six months, but I am only sixteen years old. I feel as though I'm really in love with him, but some people say that you don't fall in love until you are at least eighteen. What do you think about it? —J.M.N., Boston, Mass.

IS ROMANCE PROPER?

Dear Editors: Two years ago I fell in love with Frankie. I was eighteen then. Last June we had a misunderstanding and things haven't been the same between us since then. I don't know whether to talk to him and try to clear up our romance or wait for him to make the first move. Which way would be proper?—J.B., Wilkes-Barre, Penna.

(turn to page 103 for the Editors' answers)

Drifters Never Marry

by BILL SEVERN

His arms brought her close. "I've been looking for you most of our lives," he said

It wasn't the first time a man had dabbed his loop at Beth Rambo — and then found that instead she had roped and thrown *him!*

BETH RAMBO was holding court at the end of the dance floor when Steve Kane strolled in. She glanced up at him in the middle of a smile, and her eyes kind of held on him a minute. Just a lanky, sandy-haired young man with ordinary good looks and a manner about him which caught her attention.

A stranger to Mesa or she would have seen him before.

She wasn't surprised when he took a second look at her. They all looked and hoped and had her in their dreams. When men have been telling a girl she is beautiful from the time she began to walk, she knows it must be true.

Beth sent Lee Adams to get her a cup of punch and he just about stumbled over himself in his hurry. She turned her smile on Pete Williams and took the breath out of his words. Mitch Preston stood the other side of her, waiting to go out and rope her a moonbeam if she wanted it.

She didn't lead them on; Beth didn't have to. For a dance or a touch of her hand, any man in Mesa would have traded in his saddle. She took it as her due and took none of them seriously. The fact that Larsen Rambo, her father, owned the Queen Ranch and half the valley had nothing to do with it. Beth was a princess in her own right.

The old piano and fiddle started thumping out a lively tune and Beth turned from one man to another, making up her mind who should have the honor. She was about to give her hand to Lee when Steve stepped in front of her.

"Sorry if I've kept you waiting," he said.

She blinked a little at the stranger and flicked open the black lace fan her father had brought her from Kansas City. "What?"

His arms came around her. Strong arms and a compelling grin. Beth found herself dancing. "I would have been here sooner," he told her, "but I didn't know where I'd find you."

Beth got her breath. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about. And I don't know you."

"Don't you?" The grin came big. "You should. I'm the one who's been looking for you most of our lives." His arms brought her close and lifted her in a whirl that left her heart spinning. "Steve Kane's the name," he said. "Not that it matters."

"And you—always grab what you want, Mr. Kane?"

"Only when I know it's for me." He led her toward the door. Beth thought firmly I don't intend to go out there with him. All she had to do was glance around at the men she had left behind and let them know this stranger was annoying her. They would gladly teach him the proper respect.

She stepped out into the night and saw the stars and the moon. "I'm afraid you've made a mistake," she said. "I'd hate to cause trouble for you, Mr. Kane. But you are asking for it, you know. You can't just—"

He could and he did. He kissed her. Strangely, Beth wasn't shocked. Startled maybe, not quite believing it had happened, but mostly only wondering what had come over her to allow such a thing. She realized she was not merely allowing; she was liking it and kissing him.

Beth had been kissed before. Only last night, Mitch had asked at the door, after taking her home, if he might be so bold as to kiss her. They always asked, with words or begging with their eyes for the privilege. But never roughly sweeping her into an embrace and crushing her mouth with an unspoken demand.

She pushed away and fell back from him. Quietly, he said, "I suppose you'll want to wait awhile before we marry. I reckon I'll have to agree to that. I've got plans of my own that need finishing first and no money to keep a wife until they're done."

"Marry *you?*" Beth laughed at him. She held her hands to her sides, looking at him laughing. And she made the laughter sting.

Steve kept his grin. "We'll see." With a nod, he walked off and left her there.

Beth wanted to hit him. She wanted to throw something. She swung around. Her hands clenched, she strode back through the doorway.

Pete hurried over anxiously. Mitch came to her side. Glaring across her shoulder into the darkness, Lee asked, "Is anything wrong? If you want me to—"

"No," she interrupted. "He's just—somebody I met." It wasn't worth what Lee might make of it. A crazy moment at a dance and her own part in it were

things Beth wanted to forget as quickly as possible.

SHE hardly expected to find Steve in her parlor the next morning, but he was there when Beth came down the newly-built inside stairs of the ranch house. He was talking to her father and she heard enough to understand Steve was asking for a job. Beth stopped in the hall a minute, feeling the tick of anger run full in her pulses.

Her father said, "Sorry, Kane. You sound like a man who knows his way, but I've no use for another hand."

Out in the kitchen, Ida Mae was slamming pots around in her usual morning grouch. She had been cook and housekeeper for the Queen Ranch since Beth could remember and her bad temper in the mornings was matched only by the good food she turned out. Even Beth didn't dare invade the kitchen when Ida Mae was having one of her moods.

Beth turned with a tight smile and went into the parlor. She looked at Steve as if she had never seen him. He started to say something and then shut his mouth as he read what was in Beth's eyes. Steve's grin was all the spur her anger needed. "I couldn't help overhearing, dad." Beth's smile was sweetly innocent. "We've been trying to get kitchen help for Ida Mae. Maybe this drifter would fit in there."

"That's no work for a man."

"But if he's really hard up?" She let the smile go to Steve, waiting for his explosion, waiting to laugh when he put on his pride and strode from the house. "He could do the dusting and cleaning. Maybe he'd get along better with Ida Mae than the girls we've brought from town.

Her father cleared his throat. His glance to Steve apologized for what Beth had suggested. "I'm sure he doesn't need work bad enough to let anybody tie an apron around him." He shook his head. "Try the Bar-L, Kane. They might have something. Wish I could take you on, but my string's full up."

"I'm not bad at cleaning." Steve spoke in the same quiet voice he had used last night. "I have got a strong use for money." He turned to Beth. "You see, I'm getting married, m'am."

Beth's smile dropped. Her father stared as if he wondered why Steve was wearing pants. Around the Queen Ranch, a man was a man and proved it with all the two-fisted fights he had in him. "All right Kane." His face twisted with disgust. "Talk it out with my daughter. But if you stay on, you'd better keep to the house. Wouldn't want you going out into that rough brush and getting yourself scratched." He strung the cuss words behind him as he slammed out of the parlor.

Steve looked after him. "I reckon I got off on the wrong foot. Hope he won't think I'm marrying you just to take over the ranch. 'Course, I will some day. Nice outfit, too. But I'd marry you even if you didn't have that to give me, Beth."

She came close to slapping him, only her own self-respect keeping her hand at her side. "You're not funny." She drew her breath. "Get out of here."

"You mean I can't have the job?" He shook his head. "I do need my keep." Steve pulled out his empty pocket. "That's why I headed over here. That and figuring it would be nice if I was where we could be together.

There was another crash from the kitchen. Ida Mae hadn't dropped that pot, she had flung it. Beth's eyes narrowed. It would serve him right if she let him face Ida Mae. The whole town would be laughing at him when they heard the kind of range Steve had tried to ride at the Queen Ranch. The laughter would drive him from Mesa and Beth would join in it. "If you think you can handle a lid lifter without spraining yourself," she said, "I suppose we can spare an apron."

HE followed her into the kitchen. Ida Mae's startled look went from Steve to Beth and back again as Beth introduced her new helper. She was a big overstuffed woman with a heart that could be as generous as her build when she was in a different temper, but her words were flint-struck sparks as she

expressed herself now. "I want no mister poking his nose into my kitchen." She waved her broad hand. "Take him out of here, Miss Beth."

"But you need help." Beth went over to the peg next to the door and lifted off an apron. She tossed it to Steve. "Try that for size." She ducked from the kitchen before the blast came. Beth listened outside the door.

Ida Mae knew all the words and she was using them on Steve in a rattling brogue that made thunder. Climbing the stairs to her own room, Beth felt almost sorry for him. She gave him an hour at the most, if he lasted out the first attack.

Beth changed her gingham dress for blue jeans and a plaid shirt. Lee was coming over to go riding with her. She combed out her hair and tied it with pert little bows of green ribbon. Putting on her boots, she listened again. It was awfully quiet beneath her in the kitchen. Frowning, Beth crossed to the window. Steve's horse was still tied to the rail out front.

She went down the stairs slowly. Puzzled by the silence, Beth hesitantly opened the kitchen door. Then she stopped short. Ida Mae was smiling as she fussed over the pots on the stove. In the corner, his boots propped on the table as he sat in a tipped-back chair, Steve was calmly peeling potatoes. He glanced up. "Hello. Going out?"

Beth swallowed. "I just wanted to see whether everything was all right."

"And why not?" Ida Mae looked around. "He's a fine lad. He'll do well here."

"Oh . . ." Beth looked down. "I'm glad."

Steve dropped his feet to the floor. He got up and came into the hall behind Beth as she walked toward the front door. "It's a nice day for riding. Going alone?"

"No." She faced him. Beth didn't want to talk to him, but her curiosity was too much. "How did you bribe her?"

"Bribe?" He shook his head. "I just told Ida Mae about us. She thinks it's sort of romantic." Steve's grin softened. "Maybe it is. I kind of feel that way myself." He took Beth's hands.

She pulled her fingers free and reached for the door.

"Well, have fun." Steve caught her arm. Swiftly, he turned her and kissed her. It was brief, and very thorough. "Make sure you get home in time to eat." He walked away.

Beth stood there, looking at his back as he went into the kitchen. He started whistling softly. She wrenched open the door and slammed it so hard behind her it rattled the hinges.

She rode down to meet Lee. She let out the horse, burning off some of her anger in the ride. But there was still a lot of it inside.

Lee's smile flattered. His polite words and respectful little attentions soothed. Lee would never grab, not in a million years of wanting her in his arms.

"You're as pretty as a peach pie today," he told her. Beth's unwanted thoughts flicked back to the kitchen. "Your eyes are sparkling like you're hiding secrets in them, Beth."

"I'm not," she said.

The day was hotter than it had seemed in the house. Beth wished there were some place to stop awhile and get out of the direct sun. Watching Lee, she felt even more uncomfortable. His face was flushed and wet with perspiration; the tight collar and neckerchief he wore seemed to be choking him. She knew he had slicked up for her, but he looked silly.

They rode across the bridge at Rotten Egg Creek and the sulphurous smell of the water caught in her lungs. The creek was aptly named, there was no other odor quite like it. Beth was glad when they got to the other side where the wind blew it away.

The old Snavely ranch lay deserted along the stream, run down and abandoned since the water had become polluted by the springs. Cattle refused to drink it and Beth couldn't blame them. It had been one of the best small spreads in the valley before the springs suddenly broke through after the flood about six

years ago. Snavely had lost everything he had, trying to plug them up.

It had become sort of a standing joke in Mesa every time Mitch Preston dragged some unsuspecting pilgrim out to look at the Snavely place. Mitch held the rights as agent for the worthless property. He wasn't dishonest enough to sell, but there was a good laugh in it for the crowd which usually tagged along and hid up behind the house while Mitch poured on the talk that got some prospects all but begging for a chance to buy. On a still day, the smell was less powerful and the grass did look good.

Lee said now, "Like to rest?" He nodded to the cottonwoods. "Looks shady over there."

Beth wrinkled her nose. "Let's go on awhile."

He laughed. "It does get bad."

THEY cut back on the trail above and found a stand of pines. Beth sat beside him under the trees, but it was almost hot there. "This is nice," Lee said. He moved over a little and tentatively touched her hand.

She frowned slightly. His fingers drew back. "Wonder if it'll rain tonight?" he asked, looking up at the cloudless sky. "Looks a bit as if it might. Then again, maybe not."

"Maybe."

Lee's hand slid over to hers once more, like a timid little mouse nibbling at her fingers as he patted them lightly. "Can't tell about rain."

"Never can."

He stroked her hand, finally took it in his. "Funny about rain."

"Oh, for goodness sake . . ." Beth turned to him. "Here." She caught Lee's face between her hands and kissed him full on the mouth. Sheg ot to her feet.

"Beth!"

"Let's go back, Lee." She brushed the pine needles from her jeans and went to the horse.

He laughed. "You're a little devil, Beth. That's what you are."

"Sure." She sighed and swung up. "That's me."

Her father was at the house when Beth got to the ranch. She washed up and went in with him to the table. As they sat down, he jerked his head toward the kitchen and lowered his voice. "Still here?"

"Yes."

"I can't figure it. He don't look to be that kind. Unless he was lying, he's worked a lot of hard outfits. Told me he had a spell as peace officer down at Hot Springs, busted horses for the Box O and bossed wagon for old Chuck Grimes at—" He broke it off as the door opened.

Beth snapped back in her chair. She gripped the sides. Steve had found one of her aprons in the kitchen closet, a frilly little job with two red hearts stitched over the lace-edged pocket. On him, it looked like an oversized napkin tucked under his chin.

Her father's face went red and then purple. "Take that thing off!"

Steve pulled the bow and slipped his arms out of it.

"Either you're a damned liar or a damned fool, Kane. I aim to find out which." He grabbed the apron from Steve and hurled it to the floor. "You come with me."

"Whatever you say."

"Dad, wait." Beth got to her feet. She didn't know what he meant to do, but she had seen that expression before and she was frightened. "We haven't eaten. Everything will get cold. Can't you and Steve talk later?"

Nobody answered her. Beth followed them from the house, half-running to keep up. Her father's boots kicked a cloud of dust all the way down to the corral. "Shorty!" he called. "Get me one of those broncs over to the other ring. The buckskin you and Bus brought in yesterday." He swung to Steve. "You gave me talk about peeling 'em for the Box O. Okay, Kane. I'm asking to see your references."

"Dad, no!" Beth gripped his arm. "You can't do that."

He moved away from her, shouting to Shorty again.

She looked around at Steve. "Don't be a fool. You don't have to break your neck

just to back up what you said. Don't do it, Steve."

"Just to show you, you mean?" The grin touched his mouth. "Anyhow, you care."

Beth glanced down. "I'd care the same way about anybody. You're asking to be hurt."

"No, I don't think it would be just the same way, Beth," he said softly. Steve walked over to the second corral.

The buckskin had taken a saddle a couple of times, but the wildness of the open range was strong in him. He knew the terror of the rope and the sacking blanket. Beth remembered the fight Shorty had gone through trying to gentle him, finally giving up and letting the buckskin have it his way awhile until they had brought him in again now. Watching those struggles before, Beth had felt a sympathy for the horse, a sense of kinship with the animal's desire to run free, a gladness that his spirit couldn't be tamed.

SHORTY'S heels dug the earth, dragging the rope and pulling his weight along it. The buckskin nervously crowded against the far rail of the pen. Steve went over slowly. Everything about him made it clear he had respect for what he was doing. He touched the buckskin. The horse reared back, striking, fighting the rope. The fury ended and Steve again stretched out his hand. He rubbed the buckskin's nose, patted lightly, talking all the while in a soothing sing-song of words.

The saddle went on. The cinching brought another brief spasm. When it stopped, Steve looked around and nodded. Cheeking the buckskin, he twisted the stirrup and swung up. All hell broke under him.

Beth gripped the rail. Her nails dug into the wood. She was terrified to watch and yet she couldn't look away. The buckskin whirled, kicked, pitched at the sun. Steve stayed. Beside her, Beth heard her father draw his breath. He swore a bit, but not in anger. In his tone, there was the deep admiration of one man for another. Gradually, the fear left her. Steve could handle this.

When it was done, he came over. There was a stiffness in his walk that hadn't been there before, but if his body ached from the jolts that had about torn him apart, it didn't show in his face. He wore his grin, not cockily, but satisfied.

Her father eyed him a second and then stuck out his hand. "There's space in the bunkhouse," he said. "We can make room for you, Kane."

"I figured you might decide I was working the wrong chores." Steve took his hand. "Thanks."

Beth looked at him. "Had it all planned, did you, Mr. Kane?" Her chin lifted. "Laughing at me for being worried." She swung around. "You can be sure I won't again."

Her head high, she strode back to the house. Beth went up the stairs and into her room. She bounced herself down on the bed with her hands clenched. He'd had his way with the buckskin. But if Steve thought he could break her to his will that easily, he was wrong.

She would make her own choice for a husband and it wouldn't be any rude-mannered drifter who thought he could grab what he wanted. Beth remembered his words, *"Only when I know it's for me."* She shut them out. She knew what he wanted. A chance to marry into control of the Queen Ranch by sweeping her off her feet. Well, Beth wouldn't be swept.

Her fingers fumbled with the buttons of her shirt. Getting to her feet, Beth pulled her arms out of it and took off her jeans. She changed into her rustling dark green taffeta and traded her boots for stockings and shoes. Pete would be glad to see her or Mitch, even Lee. They knew how to treat her with respect.

Beth told Ida Mae she wouldn't be home for supper. "I'm taking the wagon and I'll get something to eat in town. Tell dad, will you?" She saw the woman's expression. Ida Mae had never approved the free rein Beth's father had given her to come and go as she pleased. It wasn't proper for a young lady to be

out alone after dark. Beth smiled a little. "Don't worry. Somebody will ride along with me coming back."

She didn't see Steve around the buildings as she drove the wagon down the road. Beth didn't look. In town, she shopped at McCarthy's General Store for a spool of cotton and some ribbon. Pete saw her from the office of his feed and supply house as Beth crossed the street. She pretended to be pleasantly surprised when he came hurrying out to her, as she knew he would. When he asked her, after a minute, whether she wouldn't do him the honor of staying to have supper with him at the hotel, Beth said, "Why, that's nice of you, Pete. I'd enjoy it."

But she didn't find much enjoyment sitting across the table from him. Pete talked endlessly about business and how well he was doing. He reeled off figures and percentages and he had as much to say as Lee about the weather. "Good steady rain about now would help," he said. "Not that the lack of it hurts things for me."

"I suppose." She hadn't realized what a bore Pete could be when he wasn't dancing. And yet, he had taken her to dinner before and hadn't seemed like this. Beth poked at her steak and soggy potato and lost the drift of his talk until she heard Steve's name. She sat up them. "What did you say, Pete?"

"Just wondering how well you know him."

"He's—working for us. Dad took him on. Why?"

"Well, he was in to see Mitch when he first hit town. Seems he came past the old Snavely place. Must have been a day when there wasn't much wind." Pete smiled. "Anyhow, this Kane hunted up Mitch, asking if it could be bought since it didn't appear how anybody was living there. Mitch didn't let on the truth to him. Figured it was a chance to set things up for a bit of fun. But if Kane's a good enough friend for you to dance with . . . I don't want any part of it if you're going to be offended, Beth."

Steve must have money if he was looking to buy a ranch, even a spread as run down as Snavely's. Then, that had been a lie, too. His needing work so badly was just another excuse to toss his loop at her. "He's not any special friend." She made her own smile. "Tell Mitch to go ahead. And let me know so I can be around to enjoy the laugh."

BETH thought about it when she saw Steve coming up from the bunkhouse in the morning and it was all she could do to keep from laughing right then. So sure of himself and all his plans. The Snavely set-up had been just waiting for somebody like him. Beth could see it, what would happen to that grin when Steve found everybody laughing at him and realized how close he had come to being swindled. Even thinking about the satisfaction she would get from it made her feel so good she spoke to him. "I hear you're buying a ranch?"

"Well, not exactly. Where'd you hear that?"

Beth didn't answer directly. "Takes money, doesn't it?" She met his eyes. "Or were you expecting to get a settlement out of dad for marrying me? I thought you aimed to take over here. Have you changed your mind about how you could use me?"

"It'll be a few years before your pa's ready to retire, I reckon." He grinned. Steve *dared* to grin. "I did need to sign on here for my keep, if that's what you're getting at." His face became serious. "I've got a bit saved, Beth. Not much and nothing I'd dip into after the sweat and time that went collecting it. I had a notion I'd find what I was looking for up in this part of the country." His words softened. "I didn't expect to find you, too."

She walked away. Somehow, she didn't feel as good about the joke as she had before. Maybe it wasn't funny to watch a man lose his dream. Steve had no right to any dreams which involved her, but the rest was something else. Work and aches and all the wanting she had heard in his voice had gone into the hope of owning a piece of land like he thought Snavely's was.

But it wasn't her fault Steve was wrong. She and Mitch and the others

wouldn't be robbing him of his money. He would move along and find some other place where the water was clear and a ranch could be built. Steve would know he had been wrong about the girl, too.

Mitch spread the word to five of them who were in on the rib. He would have Steve at the Snavely ranch Saturday morning unless the wind was too high. They were to come down the back trail and into the clearing at the rear of the old house and keep silent until he got Steve close enough for them to hear him come to terms.

The whole of Mesa knew. There was laughter in the saloons when men talked of Steve and there would be smiles for weeks after it was done. This would make high humor and a good tale to spin when folks got to rememering how the lanky young hand who had worked out at Queen Ranch a spell had been gulled. And maybe there'd be a few remarks as to how the stranger had been nervy enough to steal a dance with Beth Rambo. "He was that full of himself," they might say, "when any ranny with half a brain would see that with all she has, Larsen Rambo's daughter wouldn't look at him twice. . . ."

All that went through her mind when Beth woke on Saturday. She lay in bed a minute, thinking it and trying to justify her part in it. Pulling back the covers, she wished for a moment that the wind would be blowing strong so Mitch would call it off. But the day outside her window was as calm as the sky.

Well, this was what she had wanted, wasn't it? A chance to knock Steve down and put him in his place. Beth dressed slowly. She was alone at breakfast. Ida Mae served it to her, plunking the flapjacks in front of her and setting down the syrup jar with a thump. Beth saw from her face that Ida Mae had heard the talk, too. Ida Mae wouldn't say what she was thinking, but Beth could guess. Defensively, Beth said, "What can I do about it now?"

"If it were my place to, I'd tell you as I've tried to before. But you'd likely not listen, being the light-headed little frippet you are." Ida Mae's hands went to her ample hips. "You've been spoiled from the day your mother died Miss Beth. And what a good man like him can see in you, I wouldn't know—unless being in love makes him overlook the faults. You're shallow and flightly and too bray-headed to pull harness with a mule."

Beth rose from her chair. "I think that will be enough."

"More than enough. I'm scattering my breath to spend it on you." Ida Mae stormed into the kitchen.

Beth left her breakfast on the table and turned the other way to the front door.

SHE met them on the road from town, Pete and Lee and the others. The talk and laughter fell around her as they moved their horses up the trail. "Better keep it quiet from here," Pete said. "Don't want to tip him off and spoil the fun."

Behind the old house, they gathered silently, drawing their horses close. Mitch hadn't yet come into view with Steve. Lee winked to her and Beth gave him a smile she didn't feel. But it *was* only fun. She tried not to think about the rest. It seemed hours before she heard the other horses.

And then Mitch's voice. "You can have it at your price, Kane. Looks like you've talked me into making a bargain. Glad it's not horses I'm swapping with a shrewd trader such as you."

Pete put his hand to his mouth to hold back the laughter. Lee gave Beth's arm a conspiring little nudge. Out front, Steve answered, "I have the money with me. If you'll count it, we can sign."

"It's as good as done." Mitch's voice was pitched to carry. "Reckon we'll have to use the porch steps for a desk, Kane. Care to look over the papers?"

Beth couldn't see Steve, but his grin was as clear to her as if there were no house between them. The place he had worked for, saved for, sweating out his dream. He thought he had it now. His name on the deed. Beth shut her eyes, but that didn't keep her from seeing.

"All right." Mitch's words were even

louder. "You've bought yourself a ranch."

That was the cue. This was the payoff. The big laugh. Beth felt Lee's hand on her arm. She pulled back a little. But Pete had her other arm. They were starting around the side of the house, whooping it up as they went, really tearing it.

Beth's face was still. She raised her head and saw Steve looking at her. She glanced down and she felt sick inside.

Mitch told him about Rotten Egg Creek. He told Steve the rest. "But don't get sore," Mitch said. "Here's your money back, Kane. You can tear up those papers. It was all for laughs."

They waited. Beth felt Steve's eyes still on her. "I bought the land." There was no anger in Steve's tone. There was nothing else, just the flat words. "I'm satisfied."

"Steve, no." She went to him then. "I'm sorry. It's not funny. None of us are." Beth stood in front of him. "But you were wrong, too. There's no call to be stubborn and foolish about it just to show me. Can't you admit you were wrong—if I can?"

"Worried about me, Beth?" He took her hands. "Or is it just the same way you'd care about anybody who might get hurt?"

She found the answer. She said it honestly, from her heart. "No. It wouldn't be the same way." She shook her head. "It's different with—the man I'm going to marry."

Behind her, Mitch said, "Beth!" Lee stepped to her side. Pete came over next to her.

"Sorry, boys." Steve grinned. "Looks like we both know what we want." His arm around Beth, he turned to Mitch. "Ever hear of Hot Springs? I worked there. They make more money than out of a gold mine by accommodating folks for mineral baths. Rheumatism, aches, whatever ails them. Water like I've got in that creek down there. I know because I sent away some samples to have tested before I drifted into town. There's going to be a hotel here so big it'll make Mesa a city."

"Steve." Beth moved back. "You knew all the time? You let me think you—"

His kiss interrupted her. "It's a way to support a wife until I take over your pa's ranch," he said.

The laughter came then, full and deep and bubbling warm all inside. She kissed him and held him. Glancing over her shoulder at Mitch and Lee and Pete, Beth's whisper echoed Steve's, "I'm sorry, boys . . ."

LADY BANDIT (A True Love Story) *(Continued from page 45)*

Pearl, left alone, managed to make her way west, working as a maid or in the dancehalls where she became quite well-known.

But it was in Arizona that Pearl met Joe Boot, a tall, easy-going drifter. They hit it off well together, and the Fates conspired nicely, for it was just at this time that Pearl received a letter that her mother was ill in Toledo.

It was only natural that the always resourceful Pearl's idea of getting money quickly should be in true western style. She quickly talked the easy-going Joe Boot into the venture, and he procured the necessary equipment.

The "take" from the Benson stage was about $350.00, and this strange holdup was made even more so when Pearl insisted on returning part of the money to her victims!

When the stagecoach pulled into the New Globe mining camp the sheriff was notified and a posse formed. For four days they combed the hills while Pearl and Joe eluded pursuit. However, they were captured on the fifth evening, weary and exhausted from riding.

When the story of Pearl Hart became known, the people of Arizona considered her more a heroine than a criminal. She was the most popular figure of the day, and she recalled to the old-timers the glorious deeds of just a few decades before.

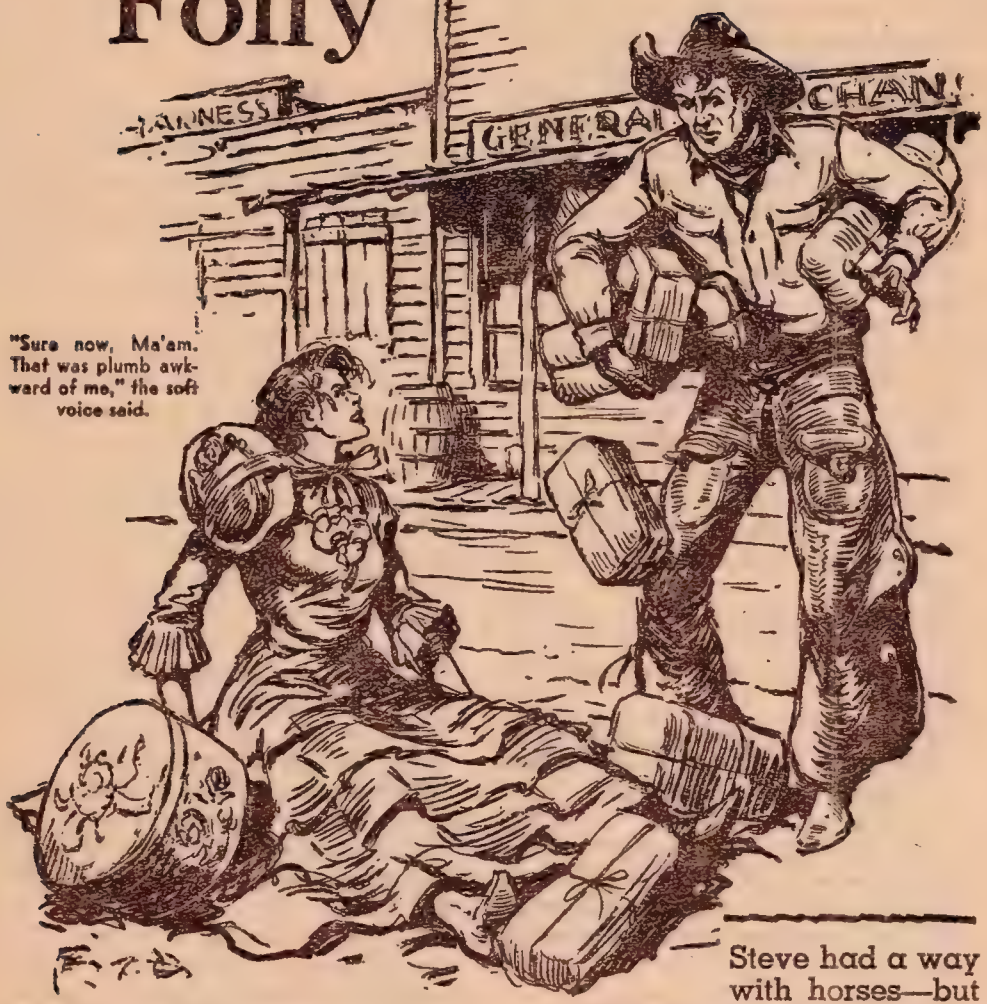
But—despite public sentiment, Pearl was sentenced to ten years at Yuma Penitentiary. She again made history by being the first woman prisoner of that institution. Even there, her strange charm asserted itself. A very, very popular inmate, she was paroled after serving only a short part of her sentence.

Released from the Penitentiary, Pearl once more traveled through the west on a farewell visit. Wherever she stopped, crowds gathered to catch a glimpse of her. Though several times, people tried to persuade her to remain, she continued on her journey. For Pearl Hart, the West as she'd pictured it was over, and she continued on to the East, a disillusioned woman, where she lived the rest of her life in quiet oblivion.

However, for a short time, Pearl had brought to life again, the essence and freedom of the early West. She established for herself a niche in western history and to this day, she is remembered as the lady bandit who tried to bring back into style the stagecoach holdup.

Filly Folly

by
GEORGE
LEWIS



"Sure now, Ma'am. That was plumb awkward of me," the soft voice said.

Steve had a way with horses—but Della figured on doing some bronc-busting of her own . . . .

STELLA RYAN came out of Paul's Emporium, her arms burdened with packages. She didn't see the legs thrust across the doorway, didn't know they were there, until she tripped and fell. Hands reached up and broke her fall, but they did not stop the packages from flying in every direction. They did not stop Stella from going clear to the porch floor, and she sat there, her hat hanging by its neck-cord, her hair tumbling down around her face, her eyes blazing.

A soft voice said, "Sure now, Ma'am. That was plumb awkward of me. I went to sleep out here and must have shifted across the doorway. I'm right sorry, Ma'am."

The man was on his feet, reaching a hand down to her. She indignantly slapped it away and got to her feet unaided. She looked at the scattered packages, and tears of frustration started in her eyes. It was just another in the series of the day's misadventures.

She looked at the man, and her anger rose swift and unreasoning. "I'm in a hurry," she snapped. "You awkward—"

She really saw him for the first time. He was tall and thin. His blue eyes were humorous and well-spaced, and his unruly tawny hair persisted in crawling from under his hat. His mouth was wide and generous, and when he smiled, Stella thought in surprise, why he isn't homely at all. His clothes were old but clean, and she noticed the crudely mended rent on the left shoulder of his shirt, the poorly applied patch on the knee of his jeans.

She was still angry, not particularly so at him, as at the world. "If you'll get out of the way," she said crisply, and bent to retrieve her packages.

The man stooped at the same time, and they bumped heads, hard.

She straightened and rubbed her forehead. She said furiously, "You—you—"

"I was just trying to help," he said agrievedly.

She glared at him a moment. "You pick up those cans over there," pointing to some that had rolled clear across the porch.

He said, "Yes, Ma'am," and moved hastily away. He was as eager to please as a puppy and twice as clumsy.

A little smile twitched at Stella's mouth. He *was* funny to watch. Deftly, she gathered her scattered purchases, arranging them in some semblance of order in her arms, and walked down the steps.

SHE was a tall, shapely girl, with brown eyes made for laughter. She knew she was pretty; every pair of male eyes in Kermit told her so. But there was no time for soft things in her life, not since her father had died and left her with a mortgaged ranch to run and her mother to take care of. She resented the way all the men for miles around slicked up and came to call on her. When her day's work was done, she was too tired to sit up and banter sweet talk.

She started to place the packages in her buckboard, and the tall man came up hurriedly to help her. Forgetting his hands were full, he reached out, and cans fell all around him. He stepped on one, his boot rolled on it, and he bumped into her. The packages spilled out of her arms again.

"Oh, you—" she raged. "I could shoot you."

She saw her foreman, Bart Madden, hurrying down the street. Even in her anger, she noticed Bart had been to the barber shop again. He was clean-shaven, and his hair was carefully cut. She supposed it would have that sickly sweet stuff on it again.

Bart came up and asked, "What's the trouble, Miss Stella?"

"Bart, run this—this thing away, or we'll never get back to the ranch."

The tall man said in an injured tone, "I was only trying to help, Ma'am."

"Git," Bart snapped. "You heard her." He was short and broad-shouldered with powerful arms and hands. He was so dark complexioned, that even freshly shaven, his face had a blue-black cast to it. He moved menacingly toward the tall man. "Didn't you hear?" he barked.

People were beginning to come out of stores, watching the scene with interest.

The tall man said mournfully, "You oughtn't to talk to me that way."

Stella opened her mouth to stop Bart. He was an able man with his fists, and he enjoyed using them. Before she could say anything, Bart was swinging at the man.

The tall man got his head out of the way of the punch. "There ain't nothing to fight about," he kept saying. He moved about like an animated scarecrow. He didn't know what to do with his fists or his feet, but somehow Bart's fists weren't connecting. His punches missed, or landed spent on the tall man's arms and elbows.

Bart wore himself out trying to catch him. He stood panting in the middle of the street, dust marring the high shine of his boots, his hair disheveled, his shirt stained with sweat. The fact that Stella was watching and people were laughing didn't help his temper any.

"Stand still," he roared.

Stella was shaking with laughter. An

irrevelant thought struck her, the tall one would be good to have around just to watch. Just seeing him move would drive the blues away.

"Stop it, Bart," she ordered. "We've got to get back." She climbed into the buckboard, picked up the reins, and at another look from her, Bart grumbling took his place beside her.

He cast a black look at the tall man. "Stay out of my way," he warned.

Stella shook up the reins, and the buckboard started to roll down the street.

The tall man stood in the middle of the street, his eyes amused. She noticed that he turned to one of the spectators and asked, "That was Stella Ryan, wasn't it?"

The spectator said, "Yes," and the tall man walked away, a satisfied grin on his face.

STELLA drove rapidly, as though trying to run away from her troubles. Bart looked at her and asked, "What did Russ Atkins say?"

"He won't give me any more time," Stella said, and despair almost showed in her voice. "I guess we'll have to sell that hundred head."

She didn't want to put those long yearlings on the market now. The market was bad, but the sale would hold Atkins off for a while. At best it would only be a temporary stop-gap. It left the Turkey Track brand with nothing to sell later on in the year, and expenses would not stop. She had another out, Russ Atkins had proposed it to her today. She could marry him and let him shoulder her troubles.

Bart saw the misery in her face and decided the time was favorable. He slipped an arm around her waist and said, "Stella, honey. There ain't no need for you to fret so. If you'd just turn everything over to me—"

She held the reins with one hand, with the other she pushed his arm away. Then she half turned in the seat and slapped him—hard and deliberately.

"Don't ever paw me," she said, her eyes flaming. "I won't tell you this again. There's nothing for you on the Turkey Track but a foreman's job."

Bart's hand was against his cheek, his eyes venomous.

"Well?" she snapped.

He nodded sullenly.

Stella drove on, the tears very near the surface. Bart was a good foreman, but he was getting troublesome. This has been a wonderful day, she thought bitterly, simply wonderful, and her mouth quivered.

She drove into the yard and turned the team and buckboard over to Bart. He hadn't broken his sullen silence all the way home. She started to apologize for the slap, then told herself angrily, no. He deserved it.

She walked into the house and put a smile on her face for her mother. "Everything's fine, Mother."

Her mother was a little, work-worn woman. All her life she had known worry and struggle. Stella thought, because of my father, because of an impractical man. Now Stella was trying to take away that worry and struggle.

She was just clearing the supper table when she heard a hallo from the yard. She walked to the door, and it was the tall, awkward man she had bumped into in Kermit.

He tried to swing jauntily out of the saddle, and he couldn't free his boot from the stirrup. He struggled with it and almost fell.

Stella was laughing as he walked up on the porch.

His face lighted as he saw her. "Why, Ma'am, I sure didn't expect to run into you here." He grinned, and she felt the charm of it. "Do you run this place?" At her nod he said, "I sure need a job, Ma'am."

She shook her head. "We've been laying off hands, cowboy. I'm sorry."

His apparent disappointment somehow hurt her. She asked suddenly, "Have you eaten?"

The grin came back, and she thought, the simplest kind of attention pleases him.

She led the way inside, rewarmed the food and set it on the table. He ate as

though he were hungry, but still he had time to laugh and josh her mother. Mrs. Ryan was a reserved person, but she warmed to this man. Before he finished his meal, she was laughing with him.

He stood up said, "Thank you, Ma'am. I'll be riding on."

Her mother whispered wistfully, "He'd be good to have around, Stella. We have so many long faces here."

Her mother felt that charm, too. Stella thought recklessly, the place is going to pieces anyway. One more thirty dollar a month hand won't make any difference.

She said, "You still want that job?" She saw his eyes sparkle and said, "Come on. I'll show you the bunkhouse."

He walked across the yard with her and said gravely, "I'll tell you the truth, Ma'am. I ain't much of a hand. I ain't much of anything. I guess that's why I can't hold a job."

She felt the discouragement in his voice, and her heart spoke instead of her head. "We'll try it for a month, anyway."

THEY passed a barn, and a soft nicker sounded from it. The man's eyes lighted with interest. "That sounded like a young 'un."

"Yes," she said shortly. "It is. Would you like to see it?"

She walked into the barn, opened the door of a box stall and said bitterly, "Ryan's folly. That's why this place is mortgaged."

He whistled softly as he saw the yearling colt. It shone like an ebony statue, its head carried high and proud. The lines of its body were beautiful and flawless, and he was evidently reluctant to take his hand from its neck.

"It's a beauty," he said softly. He saw her set face and asked, "Don't you like it?"

"I hate it," she said bitterly. "My father mortgaged the Turkey Track ranch to buy a stallion for the mare he had. A small ranch cannot afford to pay the price that stallion cost. From the moment that stallion came we've had nothing but bad luck. The first three foals died when they were very small. Then the stallion was killed. He jumped three range stallions, and they ganged up on him. Now we're struggling to pay for my father's foolishness."

He ignored the emotion in her voice. "Who was the stallion?" he asked.

She said wearily, "Amhed Bey."

He said easily, "And the mare? Is she still alive?" At her nod he said, "I'd like to see her."

She was suddenly very tired. "Not tonight. You can see her later." The intensity of her feeling against the mare and her colt showed in her tone.

She walked out of the barn and toward the bunkhouse. He followed her and did not break into her thoughts. She called, and Bart came to the door.

"Bart," she said, "I've hired another hand. This is—"

She turned a questioning look at the tall man, and he said, "Steve. Just call me Steve."

She waited a moment, and Steve did not add anything. She regretted the whole thing. A man gave his last name, unless he was hiding something. "Steve," she said to Bart, and saw the antagonism spread across his face.

"I don't want any trouble, Bart," she warned. She faced him steadily, her eyes never wavering. "I mean it."

Bart stepped aside, his face hard and set. Steve said, "Good-night," and walked inside the bunkhouse. Stella turned and moved back toward the ranch house. The foolish, gay moment was gone. She wished she hadn't hired the new man. Bart usually did the hiring, and this would increase his resentment against her. She went to bed and said miserably into the darkness, "Running a ranch is too big a job for me. It's too big."

She felt better in the morning. A fresh day always revived her spirits. She rode out onto the range with the men, and she noticed Steve wasn't a good horseman. In fact, he seemed to work very hard at not being. They were moving the hundred head of yearling steers to new grass, and Steve was more hindrance than help. He chased stock wildly, running the carefully husbanded tallow off them. He succeeded in getting swept out of the saddle by a low-hanging limb,

and he lost his rope when he lassoed a calf and didn't secure the end. The calf raced on with the long rope whipping along after it.

Bart chased after the calf, roped and threw it, took Steve's rope off its neck and came back raging. He threw the tangled coils at Steve and yelled, "What in blazes was the idea in putting a rope on him?"

Steve grinned foolishly. "I was showing the boss I could handle one."

Stella was tight-lipped. She wished she had never seen this awkward man.

Bart rode alongside of her and snapped, "Fire him."

His tone lashed at her, and she rebelled. Lately, Bart had been taking this attitude, the attitude that he was indispensable, that he could run anything, including her.

Her eyes flashed. "You tend to moving these steers," she snapped in return. "I'll make the decisions."

That hard, set look was in his eyes again. He stared at her a long moment, then turned away.

They shoved the stock into a big box canyon, belly deep in dried prairie grass. The mouth was narrow, and Bart and his two men rigged up a brush fence across the opening. Steve sat watching them.

He turned his head to Stella and asked, "Is that a good place?"

"The best feed on the range," she said shortly. "Every pound we can put on them before we ship is that much more money."

"I was thinking," he said slowly, "If anything happened, there'd be no way for them to get out."

"I picked it," she said, and her tone was curt.

"Yes, Ma'am," he said, and bobbed his head.

She had the feeling that inside he was laughing at her, and it made her angry and uncomfortable.

AFTER the stock was fenced in, they rode back to the barns, and Bart said as he dismounted, "Keep him away from me. I don't need his help."

Stella didn't miss the sneer in his voice. She colored but said, "All right, Bart." She had seen Steve work. He was useless on the range. She was sorry now of their bargain, but she had said a month, and she would not go back on her word.

Russ Atkins rode out that afternoon. He was a big man, with layers of fat cushioning large bones. His face was white and smooth, and large teeth showed when he smiled. Stella never liked the way his eyes rested on her.

"Afternoon, Stella," he greeted. "I rode out this afternoon hoping you'd thought over my words." He swung out of the saddle and handed the reins to Steve. "Give him some water," he said brusquely.

Atkins walked up onto the porch, as Steve ambled off, leading the horse.

"What is it, Stella?" Atkins asked softly. "Are you going to continue to worry?"

"Yes," she said lightly. "I'm going to sell off that hundred head. I can meet the next payment."

His eyes flashed angrily. "And what about the payment after that one?"

"I'll worry about it when it comes along." She tried to keep her voice casual and failed. She was worrying about it already.

He said, "You're a fool, Stella," and put his feet under him.

Steve came up, and Atkins said, "Get my horse."

"I'll have to catch him."

"Catch him?" Atkins shouted. "What in the hell did you do with him?"

Steve grinned foolishly. "He looked sorta lonesome. I unsaddled him and turned him out in the pasture with the other horses."

Stella's eyes danced. It was good to see Atkins ruffled. Almost, she could forgive Steve for his awkwardness.

"Go get him," Atkins yelled. "Hurry up," he roared, as Steve started slowly off.

Atkins waited a long time, and Steve didn't return. Stella walked with him to the pasture's edge. Steve was running about, trying to rope Atkins' horse. The

horse enjoyed the game; he would let Steve get fairly close, then race off.

"Who hired that clown?" Atkins asked.

"I did," Stella said steadily.

Atkins said bitterly, "First your father, then you. It isn't difficult to see why this ranch is in trouble."

Bart came up, and Atkins said, "Madden, will you rope my horse before that fool runs him to death."

Bart went back to the corral, saddled his horse, rode out and put a rope on Atkins' animal.

Steve came up to Stella and said sadly, "I was trying to catch him, Ma'am."

Stella had enjoyed Atkins' discomfiture. "It's all right, Steve." Atkins was in the saddle now. He was saying something to Bart, and Bart was listening intently. Stella suddenly wished she knew what they were talking about. She saw Bart nod, then Atkins rode off.

She nodded at Steve and turned toward the house. Weariness seized her again. She had angered Atkins, and Atkins didn't react well to that. She thought again, I wish I knew what they were talking about.

She didn't send Steve out on the range again. She noticed he spent a great deal of time around the colt. After the first day, the colt followed him around like a dog. He is a simple person, she thought, and simple people have a way with animals.

TWO days later, Bart rode into town. He mumbled something about personal business, and Stella said nothing. About a hour later Steve asked for permission to go into town.

He ruefully indicated his worn clothes. "I need some more, Ma'am."

She gave him an advance on his wages, and it hurt. She needed money so desperately, and she was spending it uselessly. I wish I wasn't so stubborn, she thought. I could pay him for the time he has spent and save the rest. It wasn't only her honesty that stopped her. It was also the thought of the hurt she would see in Steve's face.

Bart came in later that afternoon, and Steve arrived shortly after. They unsaddled within a few feet of each other, and neither spoke. Stella sighed. Her rash act in hiring Steve had brought more dissension to the ranch.

The heat was heavy and oppressive, leaving her weak and drained. She would be glad when she had that hundred head at the shipping point. Another week of feeding, then she would move them.

She spent a restless night, sleeping in fitful dozes. It was still dark when she suddenly awakened to the feeling of terrible calamity. Through her window toward the east she saw a red glow lighting the sky. Fear clutched her with a cruel hand. Fire! And in the direction of the box canyon.

She dressed frantically and ran out of the house. She aroused the bunkhouse and gasped, "Fire," pointing in the direction.

She saddled hurriedly with the men and was surprised to find that Steve was ready with the rest of them. For once, let him do something right, she prayed.

They galloped madly, Stella in the van, flogging her horse. She could hear the noise of the fire as she approached the canyon. She turned a rocky wall and saw it then, a great, leaping shaft of flame, throwing sparks high into the air. It was well into the canyon, moving with terrible speed through the dried grass. Over its crackling and snapping, she could hear the bawling of terrified cattle.

She lost her head and would have ridden out into the flame, but a hand reached out, caught her bridle, and stopped her horse.

"There's nothing anyone can do," Steve said softly.

An odd thought struck her. He sounds different now. He sounds capable and efficient. She let him lead her horse away, and her face was tight, her eyes wide. She thought of Russ Atkins, then the tears came, hard and racking. She cried for a long time, and Steve must have heard it, but he never turned his head.

When they reached the house, she did not even attempt to go back to bed. She

drank cup after cup of black coffee, and the dawn seemed a long way off.

Her mother came downstairs, bright-eyed and refreshed. She slept clear through it, Stella thought wearily. She doesn't even know of the trouble. Her mother had been happier since Steve came, and Stella couldn't tell her now, couldn't put that worry back on her face.

Her mother looked at her and said in instant alarm, "You look awful, Stella. Is there anything wrong?"

Stella shook her head and managed a smile. "I didn't sleep well last night. There's nothing wrong."

She walked out of the house, her chin high. Her mother would never have to worry; there was Russ Atkins.

Bart came up to her and said, "The new hand left this morning," and there was a smug satisfaction in his voice.

"Did you—" she started.

He shook his head emphatically. "I didn't even see him go." He eyed her curiously. "What will we do now?"

"I don't know," she said. She had five days before it was necessary to see Atkins—five days in which a miracle could develop. Her laugh was a little hysterical as she turned away. Even simple Steve knew the ranch was through. He was smarter than the rest; he got out first. He took an advance on his wages, then scooted, and the thought hurt Stella. She thought with a little surprise, anyone else could have done it, and it wouldn't have hurt as much.

Three days passed, and she was steeling herself to make the trip into Kermit. She sat in the living room of the house, her mind too tired to think. She had thought of many things, not one of them practical, not one of them workable.

She heard booted steps on the porch, and before she could get to her feet, the screen door opened, and Steve came in.

He was grinning as usual, but this grin had a difference about it. It had poise and confidence, and a certain hard brilliance.

"Good evening, Miss Stella," he said, and the thought occurred to her that always before it had been "Ma'am." She found the difference in him astonishing, and couldn't take her eyes from him.

He sat down facing her and said, "You've been fretting your head off about paying Russ Atkins." Even his tone was different, he wasn't stumbling over his choice of words.

Her eyes widened. "How—how did you know that?"

His even white teeth showed in a broad grin. "Your mother and I got to be good pals. You weren't hiding much from her, Stella."

He used her first name naturally, and she accepted it so. He said, "You don't know what you have in that colt. A colt by Ahmed Bey. The mare is Fatima." He grinned shamelessly. "Your mother let me go through your father's papers. That colt is pure Arabian blood. Your father had an eye for horses and a dream. I guess he never talked to you about it. Most dreamers keep their dreams inside of them. He was developing one of the finest blood strains I've seen." He breathed deeply. "I wish I had the money to buy that colt. That's where I've been the last three days. I took a quick trip to see O'Hea."

Stella listened breathlessly. O'Hea owned one of the biggest ranches in the state.

"O'Hea went wild when he heard about the colt," Steve went on. "He's coming up here. If the colt is what I've told him, he'll offer you twelve thousand dollars for him."

The breath went out of Stella. Her eyes were very wide and she said, "Oh, Steve." Her chin quivered and tears started from her eyes.

"Stop that," he said, and there was new authority in his voice.

She sniffled a little and said in a muffled voice, "I'm not crying." She added a little angrily, "You're different. I would never have hired you, if—"

"Yes," he nodded in agreement. He started to say something, then jumped to his feet. "Thought I heard something outside," he muttered, and hurried to the door. He went out on the porch and was gone a long moment. "Guess I'm imagining things," he said when he returned.

He looked at her squarely. "Do you

remember a kid named Johnny Blair who worked for you for a couple of months. He was pretty bitter when he came back home. He had your picture, and he used to spend a lot of time looking at it. I saw that picture, and I wondered what kind of a woman could twist a kid around so. So I rode up to have a look."

She remembered Johnny Blair. Just a kid, maybe nineteen or twenty years old. His adoration had been embarrassing, and she had been relieved when he finally quit. "Steve," she said earnestly, "I never gave Johnny any reason to feel that way. I never encouraged—"

A WILD YELL sounded from outdoors, and Steve jumped to his feet and rushed to the door. She was right behind him and saw the leaping flames enveloping the old barn. The barn was ancient and dry as tinder. The flames swept over it with terrible speed. She saw the dark figures of Bart and her other two hands running toward it.

"The colt," she cried. Steve was already through the door and racing toward the barn.

She caught up with him before he entered the flaming building. He was taking off his coat, and she struggled with him. "No, Steve, no." she said wildly. "You can't go in there."

He shook her off and dashed through the doorway. Her knees refused to support her, and she sank to the ground. The barn was swaying and rocking, and the roar of the flames drowned out all other sound. She knew he couldn't get out of there, and a merciless hand squeezed her heart savagely.

It seemed she waited there for hours, her teeth biting cruelly into her lip, and she never noticed it. Then Steve reappeared, leading the colt. The colt was shaking with fear; he could smell the fire, he could hear it, but he couldn't see it. Steve had wrapped his coat about the colt's head.

Steve turned the end of the rope halter over to Lucas, the oldest hand, and said, "Lead him clear away from here. And don't let go that rope." Lucas started to remove the coat. "Leave it," Steve snapped. "I don't want him seeing any more of this than he already has."

He stripped off his shirt, and Stella noticed the angry, red burns on his flesh, noticed that his hair and eyebrows were singed.

"Don't go back," she moaned, reaching for him.

He said simply, "The mare's in there," and she knew she could not stop him.

He wrapped a wet horse blanket around himself and disappeared into the barn again. It crackled and swayed ominously, and there didn't seem to be a timber the flames hadn't touched. In a moment, the whole structure would collapse, and Steve hadn't come out.

"He'll never make it," Bart muttered, and Stella caught the satisfaction in his voice.

She wanted to scream at him, to claw his face, then Steve came out of the fiery building. His steps were staggering, and he coughed violently, but he was leading the mare. Her head was swathed in his shirt, and she followed the pull of the halter rope. Steve passed outside of the fire's fierce heat, sank to one knee, sobbing in lungfuls of clean, fresh air.

The building groaned and buckled. Slowly, it sagged to one side, then gathered speed. It crashed with a loud roaring noise, and sparks and smoke plumed skyward.

Stella was beside Steve, her hands touching him.

He straightened and said grimly, "That was a set fire. I smelled kerosene both times I was in there. The canyon fire was set, too."

He gave the mare to the other hand to lead away and walked over and faced Bart. "You like fires, don't you? I've been careless tonight. I thought I heard someone on the porch. You listened and heard what I told Stella about the colt. Then you set the barn on fire."

Bart licked his lips. He said huskily, "You're crazy," and managed a sneering grin.

"You were pretty sore when you finally realized Stella would have nothing to do with you," Steve went on. "You wanted to hurt her and maybe pick up a little

money. You talked to Atkins out here, and you rode into town to see him. I followed you that day. I'm guessing he offered you a nice bit of money, if Stella couldn't make her payment. The night we rode out to the canyon fire, I felt your horse before you saddled. It was wet. You had to run hell out of it to get back before anyone discovered the fire."

Bart's lips twisted. "You lying—"

Steve reached out, grabbed a handful of his shirt, dragged him close, and smashed him in the face. Bart went down, hitting the ground heavily. He lay there stunned a moment, then came to his feet with a roar.

STELLA noticed that this time there was no awkwardness in Steve, no lack of knowledge of what to do with his fists. He knocked aside Bart's flailing fists, bored straight in, and his blows sledged into Bart's face and body. He poured in a half dozen with heavy, cruel strength, and Bart was knocked down again. He tried to get up, and his strength was gone. He fell back, sobbing in pain and fury. Steve reached down, dragged him erect and said in a cold voice, "Go tell Atkins his deal is off. Stella will be in to take her ranch back." He spun Bart around, kicked him and said, "Get off the place."

Bart went off at a hurried staggering pace.

Stella winced at the raw, cruel-looking places on Steve's face and chest. "You're coming to the house with me and let me bandage those—"

He said gravely, "Let me finish first, Stella. That kid was my brother."

She knew him now—at least by reputation. Steve Blair. His name was famous the state over as a top rodeo performer.

She said bewilderedly, "But all that clumsiness."

A small grin touched his lips. "Johnny said everybody slicked up when they came near you. He said they showed off their best tricks. I thought maybe a helpless, clumsy man would attract more attention because he was different. You wouldn't have looked at me, if I had been like the rest. And I'd never have known you." His face was sober as he added, "I saw your picture, I listened to the kid. I came up out of curiosity and maybe I hoped I could hurt you a little."

"Steve," she said in defense, "I never encouraged any of them. I had my hands full trying to run the ranch."

"I know that now. I know that Johnny's words were just his hurt vanity talking. I knew that after I had been here a day or so." His eyes gravely rested on her. "I'm kind of mixed up myself now, Stella."

The laughter was back in her eyes, making them sparkle and dance. She wasn't mixed up, she knew now she hadn't been from the start. She had trusted her heart, and it had been right.

She said softly, "I'm not mixed up at all, Steve. I know exactly what I want."

A new eagerness and hope was in his voice as he said, "Maybe you know for both of us."

"I do," she said, swiftly moving to him, her arms lifting to him. "A woman can't go on alone forever."

♥ ♥ *(Answers to LETTERS OF ROMANCE on page 85)* ♥ ♥

Dear J.M.N.—Love is an ageless emotion, and it is impossible to put an age limit on it. Recognize it as a mature emotion that includes learning to share and appreciate each other. Whether all this can happen at your age or even eighteen, is doubtful, but then why worry? Whatever you feel for this young man is good in your eyes, and that's the important thing. There's no need to label that feeling!

Dear J.B.—You must decide how much Frankie means to you and your future happiness. If he means a lot to you, you must do everything possible to put your romance on a smooth road again. If you can clear up this misunderstanding, why prolong it?

In our next issue we will answer many more letters from our readers.
If you have any problems please send your letters or postcards to:* THE EDITORS, RANCH LOVE STORIES, *350 5th Ave., New York 1, N. Y.

HACIENDA HEARTBREAK

THORNTON BRENT lifted himself on an elbow and stared dazedly about him. Even this slight effort left him weak and panting.

"Easy, amigo. Easy," a gentle voice said. "You still have much strength to recover."

Brent stared at the speaker. The man was dressed in the elaborate costume of the Spanish Dons. The face was etched with the lines of age, but the deep, black

by GILES A. LUTZ

How far could Brent trust a girl who called his worst enemy, "friend"?

eyes still flashed with youth. The features were finely carved, and the man carried himself with distinction. His hair was black and long with an oddly arresting white lock in the middle.

Brent had seen this man before, but always in dreams. Evil dreams of tortured moments—of this man offering water, then refusing to let him drink. There had

been other people in those dreams, but this man was always the central figure.

"Who are you?" Brent asked, his voice still hoarse from the heat and sand.

The old man smiled: "You are getting better. This is the first time you have had enough interest to ask. I am Don Guadaloupe Ybarra. You are in my hacienda. Five days ago my son, Vasco, and I found you. You were very far gone, Senor. I did not think we could save you. The desert is a bad place to be this time of year."

Brent sank limply back on the bed. He remembered another man in those dreams. That would be Vasco. But those were not dreams. Don Guadaloupe was here. Then the girl—the girl with the cool, soft hands and the pity in her eyes—perhaps she was not a dream, either.

"There was a girl," Brent muttered.

Don Guadaloupe nodded. "My daughter. She will be pleased you are recovering."

Brent closed his eyes. "Thanks," he said. "Maybe some day I can say it better."

"It was nothing, amigo. You sleep now."

Brent was asleep before Don Guadaloupe left the room. He awoke that evening, and his returning strength was a flowing tide. He swung his feet to the floor and crossed the room to a mirror. He noticed a weakness, but a few more days of rest would correct that.

He stared long into the mirror. His eyes were hollow and gaunt. His cheekbones stood out in sharp ridges over his sunken cheeks. His face, except along the jaw lines, was still reddened from the terrible hours of the sun. His jaws were a startling white by contrast.

He moved his hand along them. He had worn a beard when he started across the desert. Someone here had shaved him. He remembered the dream feeling of the cool hands of the girl and felt an odd tingle of pleasure. He looked at his reflection and said, "They were right when they said the desert could not be crossed now."

He dressed himself with care, noting that his worn clothes were cleaned and mended. A feminine hand had done these things for him, and he was suddenly eager to see this girl. He could not remember her face, only the deep, lovely eyes.

He walked downstairs and outside. Don Guadaloupe's hacienda was a two-storied adobe house with long, shaded verandas and a cool, gardened patio.

Don Guadaloupe was sitting in the patio. He saw Brent and said with evident pleasure, "It is good to see you about. Come sit with me."

Brent sat down, surprised to find that this small walk tired him. He accepted a long black cigar and put his attention on the lighting of it. "I guess I was about done when you and your son found me. I want to thank him, too."

"We thought you dead. We were a long time reviving you. Vasco and I were on the fringe of the desert when we saw the buzzards overhead. That is how we found you. You fought me very hard for more water." The old man smiled. "The good padre would find this hard to believe. That much water could be as bad as the much wine he talks about."

Brent grimaced. That was part of the bad dreams—the terrible want for water and Don Guadaloupe's doling it out in sips.

Don Guadaloupe said, "Only this morning were you rational. Before, you did much disconnected talking." He waited with polite curiosity.

He had a right to have that curiosity satisfied. Brent said flatly, "I was trailing a man. For over a year I've been a jump behind him. I was told not to attempt the desert crossing now. But I heard this man was on the coast, and I was afraid he would move on."

He was silent thinking of the many times he had been a few days behind this man. Once, it had been only a day. Now, the trail was old again, and it would take much patient searching to refind it.

"The waterholes, marked on the map, were dried up," Brent went on. "My water gave out, then my horse went. I tried to make it on foot. I didn't."

Those last two simple words told much. Hours of blazing sun and cruel sand. Exhaustion and a swelling tongue

filling his mouth. Of terror and falls—then blackness.

Don Guadaloupe said softly, "You must have wanted to see that man very badly."

"He killed my brother." The flatness in Brent's voice was almost a hopeless quality.

He told about it, and the telling fanned his old hatred. "My brother and I had a little claim up north. The dry years burned us out of our ranch, and we were trying to get a stake to get started again. I came back to our cabin one day, and our pile of dust was gone. Jim was cut to pieces. The man who killed him could handle a knife."

He turned fierce eyes on Don Guadaloupe. "Now you understand why I had to cross the desert."

Don Guadaloupe's voice was sad. "I understand. I could tell you many things about violence. But now they would mean nothing to you. You know this man?"

"I have never seen him."

Don Guadaloupe's eyes widened. "You have wasted a year trailing a man you have never seen?"

"I'll know him when I catch up to him. He was the only stranger in camp that day. It had to be him. I accounted for everyone's time but his. Men, who saw him, gave me his description. His hair is as yellow as dried grass, and he wears it to his shoulders. His left cheek is scarred, and he squints."

Don Guadaloupe's face was startled. "And his name, amigo?"

"He went under the name of Miller there. I have run down many men with the name of Miller. It has never been the right one."

Don Guadaloupe's voice was almost a whisper. "No. It couldn't be!"

Brent saw knowledge in Don Guadaloupe's eyes. "What couldn't be?" he asked harshly.

"Here comes Consuela." Relief was evident in Don Guadaloupe's voice.

THE girl sat down beside Don Guadaloupe's chair. Brent felt a breathlessness, and his heart pounded. This was the girl he thought had been only a dream. She was small but finely built. Her features were delicate, and her olive coloring brought out their loveliness. Her dark eyes were spirited, and her chin was proud and firm.

Consuela said gravely, "It is good to see you recovering, Senor."

Brent realized he had been staring and took his eyes away with effort. He felt inept, and his tongue was an awkward, blundersome thing. "Thank you, Ma'am," he managed. "For all your kindness."

"You look better with your beard gone." Her eyes held gentle merriment, and Brent felt a quick, sharp pleasure.

He grinned, and the cragginess of his face was softened. "Yes," he said. "Do I thank you for that, too?"

Her face flooded with color, and he could not be certain of what her eyes said. She looked away and said, "Your business must have been very pressing to make you attempt the desert now."

"Yes." The harshness was back in Brent's voice. "I was trailing a man named—"

"Consuela," Don Guadaloupe said hastily, "Senor Brent has not seen the ranchero. Perhaps you could show him—"

Brent turned suspicious eyes on Don Guadaloupe. This made twice that Don Guadaloupe had attempted to change the subject.

Consuela did not notice the growing tension. "You are not the only guest this week. We have—" She broke off as two men turned a corner and approached them. "Ah, Vasco has Captain Miller with him. You will meet him now."

Vasco was a younger edition of Don Guadaloupe. He had the same flashing eyes and the sensitive mouth. Brent's attention was on the man with Vasco. A tall man with long, yellow hair. Brent saw the scar splitting the cheek and the eyes narrowed in a perpetual squint.

He sprang to his feet with a hoarse cry. Don Guadaloupe, the rest were forgotten. Here was the man Brent had trailed for so many weary months. His face was contorted with hatred as he seized Miller's vest and shirt front.

"It's taken a long time, Miller. But now—"

Startled surprise replaced the smile on

Miller's face. He knocked Brent's hand away, stepped back, and his hand went to the butt of the holstered Colt on his hip.

"What's wrong with you?" he snapped.

Don Guadaloupe was between the two men, his face distressed. "Please, please," he begged. "You are my guests. There will be no violence in my home."

Brent pushed at him, and his anger and his weakness left him trembling. "I want to ask him some questions. I want—"

"No." Don Guadaloupe's voice was firm. "Vasco, take Captain Miller away." His voice held a note of apology to Miller. "All this will be explained."

Brent felt Vasco's scowling regard before Miller was led away. He walked back to his chair and sank into it. He could not stop the shaking of his hands.

Don Guadaloupe said sternly, "That was a bad thing to do, Senor. No one saw Captain Miller do this thing. You would not kill an innocent man because of a belief."

"There are ways of making him talk," Brent said. "And he is the one," he finished stubbornly.

Consuela was still wide-eyed. "I do not understand." Her voice was almost a wail.

Quickly, Don Guadaloupe told Brent's story. "And he believes Miller is the man he has been searching for," he finished.

"You are wrong," Consuela said, her eyes troubled. "Captain Miller is on his way to Bannegas to receive great honor from the governor of the district. He has been ridding the country of the Apache. He would not do such a thing as you say."

Don Guadaloupe saw the lack of conviction in Brent's face. "I cannot change your thinking." His voice had the quality of fine steel. "But as long as you are in my home there will be no trouble."

The flash of anger burned out in Brent. Slowly, he nodded. This much, at least, he owed Don Guadaloupe.

HE learned much of Miller the next few days. Miller had standing with Don Guadaloupe and the surrounding ranchers. He was a great hunter of the Apaches, and he had many scalps to prove it. Brent had seen those bags, filled with their gruesome contents. Always one of Miller's men guarded them. Those bags were valuable property, for the bounty on Apache scalps was high. Miller was to receive honor from the governor at Bannegas, but he would also receive much cash.

Brent knew of the Apache, knew of his cruelness and the stealthy deadliness with which he struck at isolated ranch families. He admitted the Apache had to be curbed, but he had little stomach for bounty hunters.

Only once did he talk to Miller. Miller's eyes held a hard curiosity. "I've never seen you before, have I?"

"No." Brent's tone held nothing.

"What were you after the other day?"

Brent's eyes probed until Miller reddened angrily. "That," Brent said slowly, "will keep."

He caught the venom in Miller's glance as he turned away. Miller would remember that affront.

Brent found a sincere liking for Don Guadaloupe and his family and something that went much deeper for Consuela. As his strength returned he rode often with Don Guadaloupe over "his little ranch," as the old man termed it. Brent grimaced. He was used to wide stretches of land, but this was something he had never seen before.

This ranch wasn't bound by fences. Natural landmarks were its boundary markers. Its great stretches reached from the ocean to the coast range, from rivers to rivers. Brent doubted Don Guadaloupe, himself, knew exactly how much land he owned. Its acres teemed with horses, cattle, and sheep, and it took the effort of many men to run it.

Don Guadaloupe reined in his horse and cocked a leg over the horn. "You have given me valuable suggestions, amigo. Sometimes we get too set in our ways. Perhaps this ranch needs new blood." His voice was very soft as he added, "It would not displease Consuela."

The words warmed Brent. Deep down he cherished a hope that he was even afraid to think about. Now he was accepted by this proud old Spaniard, and

the hope could grow into something solid.

"I would like that," he said slowly. "But first I have a promise to keep."

The smile left Don Guadaloupe's face. "You have changed since you came here. Softened and grown more human. I had hoped you were forgetting. Amigo, the dead are gone. You cannot help them. You are burning yourself up with this hatred."

Brent's voice lost its friendliness. "A man like Miller deserves killing. You people pay him honor and call him Captain. I know him for what he is."

"Once, I hated a man." Don Guadaloupe's voice was heavy. "I ruined him, took his land and cattle. He crept up to my house and shot at me. He missed me. He did not miss my wife. My vaqueros caught him before he got away. But it did not bring her back. I raised Consuela and Vasco to flee from hatred and violence. My son, if you persist in this hatred, Consuela will turn from you. She will not be able to understand."

Brent's face was set in harsh lines as he stared across the plain.

Don Guadaloupe sighed. "The fiesta, to honor Captain Miller before he leaves, starts tonight. There will be much feasting and dancing. We will forget for a time, eh, amigo?"

Brent looked squarely at him. "There will be no trouble in your household, Don Guadaloupe."

IT was not hard to promise Don Guadaloupe that. Brent doubted he could get close to Miller. In all his long search he had never counted on dealing with more than one. Now Miller had ten men in his band, and one or two of them were always near him. Brent rejected the thought of shooting Miller from ambush. Despite his assertions to Don Guadaloupe that he knew Miller was the man he was looking for, Brent felt a small doubt. It would take questions to solidify his belief, questions and force if necessary. Brent had no compunction about that.

That afternoon, he rode into Estampida, a nearby town, and bought new clothes. He dressed himself with care for the dance that night. His black frock coat was the finest, and his boots were new and elegantly hand-sewn. As a final touch, he wound a red sash around his waist.

He danced with Consuela, and they were silent many times around the room. He was thinking of Don Guadaloupe, of Consuela, of Miller, and they were mixed in his mind. He noticed Miller staring at the girl, and the hunger in the man's eyes tightened Brent's neck cords.

Consuela tipped her head back to look into his face and said, "Is it not pleasant here?"

Brent nodded gravely. Her beauty made his heart ache.

"Then stay." Her eyes were frank and unashamed.

He said slowly, "If you want me, after I keep a promise—"

"To the dead," she cried. "You cannot help the dead."

His face went stony. Don Guadaloupe was right. She could not understand.

She saw by his face he was unmoved. "If you cannot rid yourself of this obsession, do not come back here."

She looked into his eyes a long moment, then broke away, leaving him standing in the center of the room.

He walked slowly across the floor and outside, his mind and heart sick. Her father's teachings were deeply ingrained in Consuela.

He stood outside, smoking a cigarette, and Miller moved along the veranda to join him. Miller had been drinking heavily; it was on his breath and in the slur of his speech.

"She wouldn't have any part of you, huh?" Miller's laugh grated on Brent's raw nerves. "I'm telling you to keep away from her. She's a nice bit, and I've got her marked for my own."

Brent felt his hatred boiling up. He was vaguely aware of people coming out from the ball-room, but nothing was important but the man before him. He smashed his fist into the middle of Miller's smirk, saw it blotted out, and the pain of contact was wild, fierce pleasure.

Miller's cry was choked by the quick welling of blood from mashed lips. He

took a lurching step forward and fell on his face.

Brent heard a wild cry. He turned and saw Vasco struggling to break free from Don Guadaloupe's arms. Consuela stood behind them, her eyes wide with shock and surprise.

Vasco's face was twisted with fury. Brent understood his feeling. Vasco was young, and he worshipped the feats of Captain Miller.

"Vasco," Don Guadaloupe barked. He said it again, and Vasco stopped his struggling.

"He hit Captain Miller," Vasco said, and angry wonderment was in his voice that anyone would do such a thing.

Don Guadaloupe moved towards Brent. His face was cold, his eyes sober. "Was there cause, Senor?"

Brent looked at Consuela. Her face had the same withdrawnness. Slowly, he shook his head. He could not say Miller's words before all of them.

"You will leave my house, Senor." There was no trace of the warmth Don Guadaloupe had once given him. "I would prefer it to be tonight."

He and Vasco stooped over Miller. Miller was stirring, a little groan coming from his lips.

Consuela would have brushed past Brent, but he stopped her. He said earnestly, "It is not what you think, Consuela. It was not the old hatred that did this." He saw by her face she would not believe whatever he might say. "If you need me, I'll be at Estampida for a few days." He said it with a helpless feeling, for Consuela's face said she would never need him.

Brent turned and walked to his room. He took off the gay red sash and held it in his fingers. It was the symbol of gaiety, of easy, gentle living. It was also the color of blood. He dropped it on the floor and ground it savagely under heel.

HE packed his few belongings, saddled a horse Don Guadaloupe had loaned him, and rode away. He looked back and could see the lights and hear the strains of music. There was no gaiety or warmth in the sight or sound for him, and he spurred his horse savagely.

He stayed a week at the little inn in Estampida. Miller would have moved on to Bannegas by now, and it was time to follow him, but Brent made excuses to remain close to Don Guadaloupe's hacienda a little longer.

The week stretched into ten days. Brent arose one morning, looked into a mirror and said, "You are a fool. You won't break that promise, and she's not coming."

He paid his bill, walked to the livery stable, and saddled his horse. He turned into Estampida's one street and cantered out of town. At the top of a crest he halted and looked back in the direction of Don Guadaloupe's ranch. He saw a horse running madly towards town, and his heart beat quickened. That slight figure on its back—it was too far away to be sure, but it could be—

He reined his mount about and spurred it into a run. It was Consuela and his quick surge of feeling was almost overpowering.

She saw him at the far end of the street and spurred her jaded horse into additional effort.

Brent was standing on the ground when Consuela reined up, and he helped her from the saddle. He saw the tear marks on her cheeks, the wild anguish in her eyes.

"Consuela." His hands bit into her arms. "What is it?"

Her words were almost incoherent through her sobbing. He shook her roughly and some of the hysteria vanished. Her crying was quieter now, more controlled.

"My father is dead," she managed. The tears came afresh, and Brent waited a long moment.

She made the effort and went on. "Vasco and I were visiting an aunt. When we returned this morning we found him and all the members of the household. Killed and scalped."

Horror hit Brent like a physical blow. Don Guadaloupe, the quiet, gentle one. Even with Consuela saying it, it didn't seem as though it could possibly be true.

He said in a low voice, "Apaches. But all the vaqueros?"

"They have been gone three days rounding up cattle. Vasco said it was not Apaches. He went to Bannegas to face Miller."

Brent stared at her. "Miller? But why would he—"

She shook her head wearily. She was so white and drawn that Brent thought she was going to be ill. "I do not know. But you must stop Vasco. He will accuse Captain Miller and then—" She covered her face with her hands. "I cannot lose Vasco too, Senor Brent. Please bring him back."

Brent was a stubborn, logical man, and this thing he could not fit into pattern. "But Miller would have no reason."

Consuela's eyes blazed. "After you left that night, Captain Miller and I were alone. I slapped him. He said I would be sorry. If he did this thing, he would welcome seeing Vasco."

Brent muttered, "Yes." He could see a reason now. He mounted, swung his horse around, leaned far over and said, "I will bring Vasco back. I promise, Consuela."

The something, that was in her eyes the night of the dance before they quarreled, was there again. This time he could come back. Consuela's eyes said it.

HE drove his horse hard and reached Bannegas late in the afternoon. He should not be too far behind Vasco. He stabled his horse and walked through the crowd.

The streets and buildings were gay with flags and bunting, the people in a festive mood. He stopped a man and asked, "What's all the decoration for?"

The man's eyes flashed with excitement. "Captain Miller came to town this morning. Tonight, Governor Cobarrubias honors him and his men for killing the Apache. It is to be a very great celebration, Senor."

Brent heard a great deal about Miller the next few minutes. Cobarrubias was to count the Apache scalps and pay a bounty for each one. Some said the bounty was very high; as much as fifty dollars per scalp.

He shouldered his way through the crowd, turned a corner, and bumped into Vasco.

"Vasco," he cried, and relief was big in his voice. Vasco was safe; Brent's promise to Consuela would be kept.

For a moment Vasco did not recognize him. His eyes were wild, his face unshaven. His clothing was travel-stained and rumpled. This was not the immaculate Vasco Brent had known.

Something like a sob escaped Vasco's lips. "He killed Don Guadaloupe."

Brent led him out of the crowd. "Consuela told me. But the scalping. That's Apache work, Vasco."

The blaze burned fiercely in Vasco's eyes. "I found the prints of shod horses. Apache horses are not shod. The horses, cattle, and poultry were not stolen. The Apache would take them. There was no sign of a fight. None. Someone who was thought to be a friend did it. Don Guadaloupe and all the household members. It was only Providence that Consuela and I were away. Senor, when I think of it, I cannot stand it. All day I have been watching Miller. When I find him alone, I shall learn for certain. Consuela told you of the happening between her and Miller the night of the dance? Only this morning I learned of that."

Brent nodded. He could understand the killing of Don Guadaloupe and possibly the household members. There would be no witnesses. "But the scalping, Vasco. What would Miller gain by that?"

Vasco took off his high-crowned hat. "Money. Much additional money. There were many servants. My hair is black and coarse. On a scalp it would look like Apache hair. And the bounty is the same."

He looked at Brent and said, "You still do not believe? There is a way of final proof, Senor. You remember my father. You remember the white lock of hair."

Brent's eyes were burning like Vasco's. He thought of Don Guadaloupe, the gentle man, the man who did not believe in violence. He wondered if Don Guadaloupe

had been hard and ruthless this would have happened.

"Someway, Vasco," he said, his voice as cold as the winter wind, "someway, we will check those scalps."

"We cannot go to the governor," Vasco said dully. "Don Cobarrubias is an honest man, though stupid. He would call in Captain Miller and ask him about this. And Miller would have time to act. If we find—" He stopped and changed it to, "The scalp, we can go to Don Cobarrubias. He knew my father well."

"Where's Miller staying?" Brent asked.

"He and his men are quartered at a house on the edge of town. I saw the bags carried inside. They will all attend the dance tonight. That will be our time."

They kept Miller's house under surveillance the rest of the afternoon. They waited long hours, and the stubborn sun finally slipped from the sky. In the distance, they could hear the increasing volume of sound as the gaiety got under way. Bannegas was building up to a big night.

Vasco stirred impatiently, and Brent said, "Wait. We have the entire night."

It was dark when Miller and his men came out of the house. Vasco counted as they came out. "He left a man."

Brent said, "I expected that. Those bags are valuable to him. One man will not be hard to handle."

They waited a long time on the chance that Miller or one of his men might return. They walked up to the house, and Brent flattened himself against the door.

Vasco rapped loudly. A head was thrust out of an upper window, and a surly voice said, "What do you want?"

"Captain Miller sent you a bottle, Senor."

They heard the guard's grumbling as he unfastened the door. "One bottle to make up for an entire night. No one needed to stay."

HE opened the door, and Brent struck sharply with his gun barrel. The man sagged with a whispered groan. Brent made a quick examination. "He won't move again," he said grimly.

They dragged him inside and thrust him into a closet. Several lamps were burning, and Vasco wanted to turn them out.

"Leave them," Brent advised. "It's natural this way."

They found the burlap bags in Miller's room. Brent knew it was Miller's room by the dusty black chaps.

Vasco dumped out the bags, making a rapid search. He kept shaking his head, and Brent knew he was not successful in his hunt.

Brent thought he heard a sound downstairs and stiffened. He felt someone in this house. He listened, and the sound was not repeated. He sidled over to Vasco and said in a low whisper, "Keep on looking."

He took his place beside the room's entrance, making certain the opening door would not bump him.

The door was suddenly kicked open. Brent was glad he chose his place well. Miller appeared in the doorway, gun in hand.

"Ah, Vasco," he said, and if he were surprised, it did not show in his voice. "It was a good thing I forgot something and had to come back. Thought there was someone in the house when I found the front door open."

Brent cursed silently at his carelessness of the open door. He aimed for the wrist of the hand, holding the gun, and his gun barrel thudded dully as it landed.

Miller howled with anguish, and the gun slipped from his hand.

"Hold it," Brent advised. "Just move back against that wall."

Miller stared at the ready gun, at Brent's face, and slowly he put the wall at his back.

"Go on, Vasco," Brent said.

"Perhaps you know what I'm looking for Captain," Vasco said, and his eyes gleamed savagely. "You should pray I do not find it."

Brent saw Miller wet his lips and wondered if he guessed what Vasco was seeking.

Vasco cried hoarsely, "Por Dios."

Brent could not turn his head away

from Miller. Vasco moved into Brent's line of vision. He held out his hand.

"This is the proof," Vasco said, and his face was cruel and predatory. He moved towards Miller, then hesitated. "My father told me your story," he said to Brent. "I know now your feelings. Would you like to be sure before this thing is done?"

Brent nodded, and Vasco said, "Keep your gun on him." He pressed in on Miller and put the point of a knife against Miller's throat. "Don't," he warned, "move. I can drive this home before you lift your hands. And Senor Brent is ready to shoot."

Sweat rolled down Miller's face, and his color was a pasty gray.

"Senor Brent wants to know about a robbery of gold dust—and the killing of his brother. A knife killing, Captain Miller."

Brent saw Miller's eyes widen with the flash of guilty knowledge. He said quietly, "He doesn't have to say it, Vasco. Step away from him."

Vasco moved away from Miller. His voice was emotionless as he said, "I have a newer claim, amigo. It is better for me to do it. There is Consuela to think of."

Brent could not change Vasco from his intentions. He was suddenly tired, tired of violence and hatred. He nodded quickly.

Vasco reached into his jacket and produced a mate to the shining blade he held. "You like knives, Gringo. Use it."

He tossed the blade down beside Miller. Slowly, Miller picked it up. He had a certain courage, cornered-coyote courage, Brent admitted. The knowledge that he would not leave this room was in his eyes, yet he moved forward.

Vasco's blade had a terrible skill. It flashed in and out, parrying and thrusting, nicking away at Miller, drawing cruel white lines that rapidly reddened on his face and chest.

Miller's breathing was a hoarse slobbering, and he rushed Vasco with animal-like power. Vasco danced lightly away from each rush, and Miller bled from a new cut.

Brent watched with sick fascination. He suddenly realized that Vasco was toying with the man, that he could finish this any time he wanted.

"End it," he gasped. "End it, Vasco."

Vasco flashed him a quick glance. He leaped in, swept aside Miler's feeble thrust and buried the shining blade deep into Miller's chest.

He stepped back and let Miller fall. Miller fell heavily, his hands clutching at the knife haft. He kicked convulsively, a half scream burst a red bubble at his lips, then he was quiet.

Vasco said, "It is done, amigo."

His face was older, more tired. "My father was not often wrong. But in this h was. We owe something to the dead."

He put an arm around Brent's shoulders. "You will come back to the ranch with me amigo. There is much work to be done."

Brent said simply, "I would like that."

A faint smile touched Vasco's lips. "And we must hurry—Consuela is waiting for your return."

★ ★ *SMALL CONSOLATION* ★ ★

by Wilma Ericson

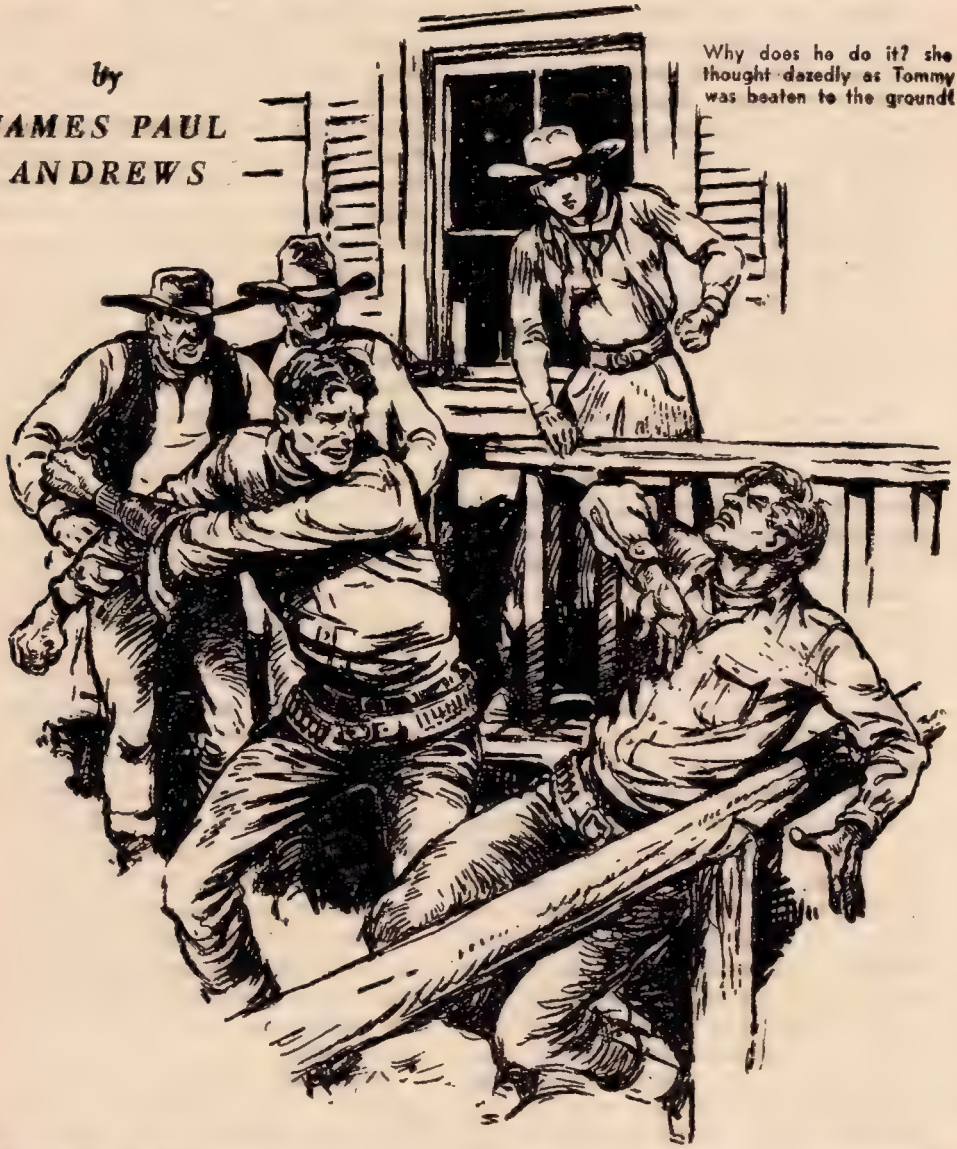
I know that in a few short years
You just won't mean a thing;
I'll think of you and shed no tears,
I'll laugh—and even sing.

A score of months or so, and then,
They tell me, I'll forget;
My eyes will be quite dry again;
But now, my cheeks are wet . . .

TOPHAND *Means* BEST MAN!

Cowboys had come and offered Beth love. But each time there was the quiet anger in her foreman's voice and the bloody scene by the hitching post . . . .

by
JAMES PAUL ANDREWS



BETH AMES reached up to brush back a cascade of burnished-copper hair, then drew her hand down, trembling with pity and rage. The pity was for young Tommy Quantrill, whose slim, proud figure was slowly, ruthlessly being beaten to the ground there on the flat, hard-packed earth by the Lul-

laby Ranch hitching posts. The rage was at her tophand Jed Ranace, whose great rawboned hands were smashing and battering through the youth's defenses.

Why does he do it, she thought dazedly; there's no love in it—*only hate and brutality.* It was the same, strange baffling pattern that wasn't a pattern all over again.

There had been clean young men before who had come to work at the ranch, and had offered love. And she was long ready, she thought, looking at the ripeness of herself. She was ready for somebody's love, but each time it had been offered, before she could accept or reject, there had come the heavy quiet anger in Jed Ranace's voice. And then, shortly after, there had been the bloody scene by the hitching posts, or back of the bunkhouse, and then a forlorn humiliated figure trailing out across the flat range and out of sight forever.

She asked herself again, *why does he do it.* She looked around the thin circle of watching faces for the answer, but it wasn't there. The eyes of these men held respect for a boss who would send a hand packing if he appeared responsible for a missing sack of tobacco, and then would ride twenty miles into town to hire him back if his guilt was disproven. But their eyes gave no added honor to him for these beatings. And surely Ranace must know now, after three years, that the men had accepted him as top hand all around.

Now, unwillingly, she felt the pull of the fight in front of her, Ranace had just driven a straight-arm blow that had lifted Tommy Quantrill in the air and dropped him to the ground on hands and knees, his blond head sagging wearily. Ranace was standing back a bit, his big-boned shoulders relaxed, waiting.

She turned her face away, and tears sprang unasked from her eyes. She wiped at the delicate white curve of her cheek, and thought about the ride she and Tommy had taken the other day. They had gone to the cottonwood grove in the north corner of the spread; Tommy had laughingly bet that the sunset glow would change the color of her hair. And when she had hesitated, afraid to tell this prideful boy her real reason, he had guessed it, and laughed again. "I reckon it's time for somebody to tame your watchdog," he had said.

They had gone, and Tommy had helped her climb a pile of rocks for a better view of the sunset. He had helped her a little more than necessary, and then there had been the moment at the top when she stumbled, and he caught her close and brought his lips down on hers. But she had swiftly pushed him back because she couldn't take him seriously except as a substitute for the likable kid brother she had always wanted. Then, they had heard the scrape of a match, and the flicker of light had showed her the black brows and long jaw of Jed Ranace. That was all —except for this.

Tommy had lurched to his feet now. He was moving his battered face from side to side, trying to see, and swinging almost blindly at Ranace. And Jed Ranace wasn't moving, yet. He was standing still, waiting for a chance at the one blow that would finish.

At least he doesn't torture them, she thought. Ranace always finished a fight as fast as he could, but faced with the futile gallantry of one like Tommy Quantrill, his fighting was still a terrible thing.

But yet, Beth looked for a reason behind Ranace's actions. It couldn't be merely to protect her. An orphan since she was fifteen, now at twenty-one, she knew how to take care of herself, and Jed knew that she did. He had seen her shrug aside the advances of drunken roughnecks in town who reached out for her slender yet curved young fullness.

Looking still for an answer, her eyes carried beyond the small group of hands near her, to the lone, casual figure lounging against the rail of the corral some yards away.

This was the new man, Hasse, who had ridden in this morning, and she wondered how he was reacting to all this. Perhaps a look or a word from him would give her a clue; Ranace was too good and just a ramrod to lose, but this must stop, and she had to find a way to stop it short of letting Ranace go.

HASSE was watching Quantrill again trying to get up off the ground, and this gave Beth the chance to size him up unobserved. He was tall, and though lacking Ranace's broadness, there was a wiry whiplike strength about him. And the light curly brown hair, contrasted with the almost-blackness of his eyes, made him darkly handsome in a way that sent a small momentary thrill through Beth Ames' body.

Now, Hasse noted her approach, and his keen look covered every inch of the ripeness under her rough range clothes.

"Why don't somebody stop this show?" he asked. There was more curiosity than emotion in the question; it lacked the eagerness of the look he had given her.

Beth shook her head. She knew that nothing could stop Quantrill's pride and Ranace's stubbornness. It would go on until it was ended.

"I calculate things are different when a gal bosses a spread," he said, but there was more humor than criticism in the second appreciative look his dark eyes gave her. Again, over the strong push of anger and pity in her mind, came a faint thrilling at the look of this man.

She started to speak, and then the shift of Hasse's eyes to the fight distracted her attention. From somewhere, Tommy Quantrill had drawn a desperate strength, and he was hitting Ranace, and even driving him back. Ranace took two jolts on his big jaw, then put his head down, and started to whale cutting, slashing fists into Quantrill's middle and to his head. All of a sudden, the blond head went limp, and the boy seemed to buckle in two and go down.

Ranace knew it was over; Beth could see that. She watched Jed wipe a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth, and then swing a black-browed glance around the group of watching men.

"There's more of the same for any son-of-a-buck who tries to set himself up as more than just a cowpoke around this spread." His glance ended up on Hasse, and seemed to Beth to rest there a fraction longer. Then the big ramrod swung his wide shoulders around to help the other men carry Quantrill to the bunkhouse.

Hasse hunkered down by Beth's side and started deliberately to build a smoke. And all the time his lean fingers worked, his eyes were flashing up at Beth. It was almost as though they were sending some kind of a current, because Beth felt that chilling sensation she had when he'd first looked at her, but this time it came in a steady flow, and it was harder and harder for her deny that it was very pleasant.

Beth pushed the pleasure back, and said, "I'll be going. You'll get chow at six—in the bunkhouse."

She started to move away, but those dark eyes caught her and held her, almost in an embrace.

He said, "Ma'am, I just want to say this. I like this place fine, except for one bad feature. I aim to get shut of that feature one way or another, and then everything will be very fine indeed."

Beth felt an uncontrollable flush at the tone of promise in his voice, and to hide it, she turned away, and headed for the far end of the corral, where she kept her brown pony tied.

QUANTRILL, though badly beaten, hadn't looked seriously injured, and there was nothing she could do to help right then. Besides, there was a powerful jumble of feelings inside her, and she needed to get away and be alone with them for a while. She swung gracefully onto her pony, and gave him his head.

Both of them knew where they were going. There was a line shack, now out of use, out by the cottonwoods where she and Tommy had watched the sunset. She found it a good place to go when she had troubles to settle with herself, and it was toward this spot that she was heading. . . .

She was sitting on the doorstep of the shack, watching a pot of coffee simmer over the small fire she'd built outside, and she was wondering the same thing over and over again: *what can I do about Jed Ranace?*

She only half-heard the unfamiliar click of a cleated boot on stone, but the

towering shadow that swept over the firelight made her look up, startled.

She stared up into the keen, flashing eyes of Hasse. Uninvited, he walked over, and seated himself beside her on the doorstep, and again she felt a disturbing vibration inside her—a vibration that had nothing to do with the Lullaby spread, nor with Tommy Quantrill, nor with Jed Ranace.

Hasse calmly put a lean hand on her arm, and said, "Trouble?"

At contact, the vibrations grew stronger, and Beth felt her lip quivering as she said, "Big trouble."

His hand gripped her arm tighter, and then, somehow, the whole jumble of feelings that had piled up on her during this bad day seemed to come crashing down inside of her, and a violent sobbing started in to shake her small body.

The racking of her sobs was so violent that she hardly knew when two strong arms went around her and drew her in close and tight. She only knew when, what seemed like hours later, the sobbing died away as rapidly as it had come, and she found herself firmly cradled in Hasse's arms.

Then, she looked up at him, half frightened and half expectant, and saw a new light leaping out from the mysterious darkness of his eyes. Her lips parted, and she felt a pulling at her heart that she had never felt before.

His lips were coming down on hers, first firmly, and then bruisingly, and then fiercely insistent. For a moment in her weakness, she was yielding before his demand, and then his kiss was reaching down inside her and drawing out all of her. And she was responding completely, matching his savagery with her own; some force was drawing their bodies closer and closer together, until she could feel every pulsing in this man, building, building.

And then, suddenly, she found herself lying back in his arms, panting and exhausted. Her first feeling was amazement—amazement that this was she, Beth Ames, and that she was in the embrace of this man, Hasse, whom she had only met a few hours ago. It was as though it all had been a dream.

But then Hasse spoke, and she knew it all must be so. He said, musingly, "Big trouble . . . We'll see what we can do about your big trouble. And then . . ."

By that time, Beth had recovered herself, and was getting up. She noticed that the strange light had gone from his eyes, and now they were almost totally dark, frightening and unfathomable.

All she could say was, "I must get back to Lullaby . . ." and then she stopped, remembering that she had said this once before. And the result had been a meeting rather than a parting. Then she wondered if there would ever be a parting, and if she ever wanted it that way again. . . .

Not daring to look back, she went to her pony, calling back a brief impersonal warning about Ranace. She walloped her pony on the flanks, and rode back to the ranch house very fast—much faster than necessary.

BETH'S sleep that night was a thing of strange, fearful poundings; sometimes these seemed to be the wild, pulsing beat of Hasse's veins, and sometimes the violent, thudding blows of Jed Ranace's fists. And finally they merged into a more definite sound, which she awoke to identify as knocking on the ranch house door.

She dressed quickly, and hurriedly opened the door to meet the fierce blue eyes of Ranace, glaring out from under heavy black brows. He pushed his way relentlessly past her and strode into the center of the front room, then moved back to meet her.

He said in his usual headlong way, "You were out over at the line shack last night?" It was both a question and an answer.

She nodded, and a noose of fear circled over her mind.

"Somebody with strange boots and a strange cayuse was out there too." His big hands hung slack, but she sensed the dangerous tightening in them.

The noose of fear settled around her mind, and began to tighten. Nevertheless,

she stamped her small foot, swished her copper curls, and looked him square in the eye.

"If you want more information, the somebody with the strange boots and the strange horse was there with me. And I'd like to know, Mr. Ranace, where you get off asking and interfering. Haven't you done enough already?"

The anger in his face had a force that made her look away. She turned her eyes back to his hands, and she observed that they were clenching powerfully, and unclenching.

"Interfering!" He said it as though it were Satan's strongest cuss word. His anger drove him to the other end of the room, and then the storm inside him took on a kind of violence she'd never seen in him before.

He came back to her and gripped her with a crushing force that sent arrows of pain down her spine. And then, deliberately, he shook her back and forth like a doll, until she was limp under his hands from hurt and dizziness.

Dazedly, Beth saw that he realized that he had gone as far as he could with this outlet of wrath at a woman. And, yet his anger wasn't spent; it was still increasing, and now his big long face was twisted with frustration at having no way to express it.

Then, his hands, which had loosened their grip on her shoulders, let go entirely for a moment, and Beth felt herself falling.

But she never completed the fall, because he reached out in one clumsy violent gesture, and pulled her against him. First, she felt only the rough, fuzzy texture of his homespun shirt against her cheek, but as he crushed her closer and closer, she began to feel the bigness of the man himself and the heaving of his chest.

"Jed, no . . ." she heard herself saying, and she saw a distant flash of lean fingers and strange dark eyes, and then she was all with this big rough, brutal man, and a new sort of throbbing began within her. She managed to turn her face up to him, and then she felt herself swept up in his arms, and her face brought level with the long jaw and the urgent blue eyes, and his kiss was lancing through her in a long, painful thrust of ecstasy. And she felt herself seizing the thrust and giving everything in her back to it. The pressure of the lancing increased and increased until it was suddenly an explosion with colored lights and noises, and finally a voice calling out something that wasn't quite clear . . .

"Jed, Jed . . ." Now she heard the voice, and it was her own; there she was again, with Jed Ranace slowly lowering her into a chair, where she lay back, completely spent, and gazed up at him.

For a moment, the remnant of emotion hesitated on his face, and then was gone, and the Jed Ranace she knew so well was glowering savagely down at her.

"I'm not saying anything more about last night, lady, but I'm just telling you that if you don't want to br— yourself more trouble than you ever saw in one place, you better stay away from that Hasse. I've learned some things about him I don't like. Soon's I can get a hand to replace him, I'm going to pay him off and make him travel. And, if you don't aim to—"

AT this moment, the cook burst into the room, followed by a small, grim-faced knot of hands. At first they were all yelling in a meaningless muddle of sound, and then suddenly they all were silent, and everybody was looking at Ranace.

Then somebody yelled, almost hysterically, "Tommy Quantrill died in the night. Cook found him dead in his bunk just now."

Then the cook piped up, "Those last hits of Ranace's kilt him. They's a whole bunch of welts where he hit him in the forehead—only them big knuckles of Ranace's could have done it. But they done it. They smashed his head."

Beth, up to this moment, had been groping around in her mind for something to hang onto, and she had been beginning to think that she had found it. And now, came this numbing shock, which spread all over her, until all she could think for several minutes was:

Ranace beat Tommy to death, and this over and over again.

Then the shock was past, and there was nothing inside Beth but a great coldness that had at its core total, lonely emptiness. She stared at Jed Ranace blankly.

"There's only one thing to do with dogs like that one," Hasse said, lounging in at the door. "Let's take him out that way a piece." He jerked a long thumb toward the nearest group of cottonwoods.

Beth spoke as though she hadn't heard him. "I'll make up your wages and you can go—now, Ranace."

Then for the first time she really saw what was happening to Ranace. A look of incredulity on his face was fading, and being replaced by utter slackness. His eyes were vacant and staring, his broad shoulders were slumped over, and his great hands—his killing hands, Beth thought with a shudder—were spreading and closing spasmodically.

Then, suddenly, there was a change. Ranace's long jaw stiffened and came up, and his eyes now became alive and ferocious.

"I don't mind either suggestion that's been made, lady," he said, swinging his bulk toward the door, "but there's one chore I plan on finishing."

Ranace moved forward, and as he moved, the hands swarmed around him, and momentarily penned him in. And then, suddenly, the vast, bull-like strength of him was bursting through. He knocked the first two men into the rest of the bunch, and got to the door with incredible swiftness.

He was raising his arm for a sledge-blow at Hasse, when the cook caught him a solid blow on the back of the head with his pistol butt. Ranace stumbled, started to slouch forward, then stiffened.

With a lazy motion of his arm, he swept the cook back into the midst of the men now crowding the door, and before a gun could be fired, he got around on the other side of Hasse.

Hasse seemed to be waiting for him, hand on his gun, and then Beth saw that Hasse had waited too long, underestimating the swiftness of the big man. Ranace bulled forward, seized Hasse around the waist, and hurled him to the ground, going down on top of him. Beth saw what Jed Ranace meant to do as his last chore. He ripped Hasse's gun, holster and all, from around the man's waist and hurled it aside; then he did the same with his own gun.

He got up and pulled Hasse with him, still holding the lighter man between himself and the guns that were against him. Beth's heart sickened as she thought of what Ranace could do to Hasse. But then she remembered the wiry feel of the arms that had held her at the line shack, and further noticed that the cook's pistol blow had taken its toll of Ranace's strength.

"Wait till we git a clear bead on him; it can't help but happen any second. Hasse won't git a bruise out of it." The cook spoke this in her ear.

She found herself saying instinctively, "No, no! It's taking too great a chance. Wait until somebody's down to stay."

And then there was no longer time to speak, or even think. The two men were at each other, blasting and smashing. Ranace's first bull-like surge swept Hasse back against the wall of the ranch house, where one thudding fist brought blood gushing from the lighter man's mouth, and sent him sliding slowly down the wall of the house to the ground.

But this was a feint. Hasse came off the ground spryly and doubled Ranace up with sharp thrusts to the middle. It was clear from the manner in which the big man backed off that he wasn't fighting as usual. There was something more than the blow on the head; after that first wild rush, the drive, the force had seemed to seep out of Jed Ranace.

NOW, he was fighting uncaringly, trying to block the quick cutting blows of Hasse. Strangely, this disturbed Beth; it reminded her of seeing great acres of rich grazing land crumble into dust during drought-time. Admiring the fierce strength of this man Ranace was something Beth couldn't do anything about. But her mind went back to his bru-

tal killing of Quantrill, and this merged into the savage kiss he had forced on her. And then, somehow, Ranace's kiss became mingled with Hasse's in a meaningless whirl, and blurred the sight of the two men fighting for their lives.

Suddenly, her heart crept up into her throat. Hasse's blows had begun to stagger Ranace, and then, in a flash, the big man had swung a crashing fist squarely into Hasse's face, and sent him down on the ground.

Seeing Ranace getting ready for a finishing charge, the cook raised his gun, but Beth put her hand on his arm, and unthinkingly held him back.

Ranace made a short run at Hasse, who was lying groggily on his back. At the moment he reached Hasse, he hurled his bulk at the smaller man.

The whole thing happened in a fraction of a second, but Beth was aware of it all. She saw Ranace's big body propelling itself forward, and she saw the swift reaction by Hasse.

Hasse boots shot back, flashing sunglints on their soles in the sun, and then rifled forward, catching Ranace head-on. There was a heart-rocking impact, and then Beth saw Ranace's body go limp and dead on the ground.

The fight was over, but something was troubling Beth strangely, and she couldn't understand it, because there was Hasse coming toward her, and soon his lean arms would be about her and the core of lonely emptiness inside would give way, and open to him.

But she wasn't looking at Hasse; she was looking at Ranace lying on his face, and then, unknowing, she was running wildly to him. She was sure now that it was and always would be Jed Ranace, though it was all over for them, because the dead body of Tommy Quantrill lay between them. In spite of all this, and the fact that Jed Ranace was lying on the ground half-dead after trying to kill another man, the evening with Hasse faded, and she recalled that she had thought Hasse's kiss part of a dream, while after Jed had taken her in his arms, she had called to him. . . .

"Jed, Jed . . ." she was calling to him now, but he lay there on his face like a stone. Then she turned him over, and saw the welts where Hasse's boots had struck him. . . .

Immediately, she recalled something that had almost slipped away from her —it was the strange click of boots, and then the odd flashing of boots, the same boots, in the sun. And she heard Hasse saying, "I aim to fix things one way or another," and she understood it all, and reached for the gun that lay near Jed Ranace's great silent body.

She whirled, thumbing back the hammer, and centered the gun on Hasse. She saw that he knew immediately that she had found him out. He knew that she had connected the welts on Tommy Quantrill's dead, crushed face with those on Ranace's.

His gun came up in a flash, but hers blasted first, and caught him high on the shoulder, and flung him to the ground.

The hands halted dead, with puzzled faces until they saw the marks on Jed Ranace's face.

Beth Ames, once she saw their comprehension, felt a strange weakness sweeping over her in waves. She dropped the gun, and began to fall forward, when a large pair of hands swooped down out of nowhere, caught her up, and pulled her in against a broad chest. Again, she felt the bigness of the man, and the heaving of his chest, and then came the kiss which lanced through into that once-empty core of her, and stirred her out of her faintness into a full, free response.

Presently, she lay back as Jed carried her, limpingly but surely toward the ranch house. She closed her eyes and smiled; he was mumbling something about this being the end of woman trouble on the Lullaby.

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Lasso Your Love

By NORMAN OBER

I

CASSIE TIMMONS brushed back an unruly lock with her elbow and went back to mixing cake dough. A raucous rebel yell outside told her the male wolf-pack of Bar C was back from the range. She made some rapid calculations. A good fifteen minutes to raise cain before they'd wash up and change. Yes, chow'd be on time.

Cassie was a mite of a girl. She stood

Cassie didn't think Danno'd ever cut her sign, but if a girl never tried for love, she might as well go back to her home range!

"You'd best get yourself indoors. Some of the boys tend to be . . . well, sort of irresponsible."

IT'S A LOVE LOTTERY AT THE BAR-C!

RANGELAND NOVELET

five feet even. Her New England features were on the plain side. That had been in her favor, of course. Rough-tongued Horace Sagamore, owner of Bar C, when he'd reluctantly hired his distant relative, had been very clear on the point.

"Remember, Cassie, lassie," he'd quipped, "you'll be the only woman on the place, one of the few in the whole territory. Don't have too much truck with the men. Wild they are, untamed, but good hands. Wrong woman among 'em could wreck the place."

Now Cassie sighed as she listened to the shouts the men were exchanging, hitching their mounts, hazing the Chinese houseboy, Chan, who'd scrambled out to greet them. It was little consolation to her that she'd *had* little truck with the men. Except for the attentions of diminutive Danno Boyle, her arrival had excited no male ardors at all before they went out for roundup.

"My ambitions," the girl mused, "are not high-falutin'. Serious Danno'd suit me proper. Truth is, he's the only one among 'em I'd show up next to."

The door opened behind her. She wheeled. It was Danno Boyle. The short, serious-faced cowboy was the only one of the punchers who didn't join the tarry-hooting and gunplay for which Bar C was notorious. Danno saved his money and managed discreetly to be elsewhere when there was trouble.

"Hi, Danno!" she threw at him. "Boys get through town without committin' any deviltry?"

Danno Boyle shrugged. If he was especially glad to see her, he took no pains to look that way. But his eyes were soft and kind, sort of distant. Cassie privately discovered in his absence that there was poetry among his books.

Danno responded to her question, "I'm afraid folks in town are commencing to be out of patience with us."

Cassie's brow creased. "Why? What's happened this time?"

Danno looked apologetic. "Cliff Madden and Chuck Dorian rode their mounts down the new sidewalk they're layin'. The whole stretch that's finished is dryin' with hoof prints on it."

Cassie sat down the mixing bowl and got a baking tin. "Honestly," she scolded, "they're tryin' so hard to lift that town out of the mud and civilize it. And Horace Sagamore's clowns spoil things every chance they get."

Danno watched her pour the contents of the bowl into the baking tin. He kept silent until she slid it into the oven. Then he told her, "Anyhow, they've got old Horace's back up. He's fixin' to speak his piece at supper. Thought I'd mention that so you could stock his place with his favorite vittles. Make things a mite easier all around."

She favored him with a frown. "Danno Boyle, is that the reason you came in here so fast, just to get me to soften up old Horace for your ruffians?"

There was a momentary twinkle in his eyes. Danno retreated to the screen door. As he disappeared, he said gravely, "That and to make sure you hadn't taken yourself elsewhere while we were on roundup!"

She threw after him testily, "Stow your mush-mouthing, Danno Boyle. And send in that Chinese boy or there'll be *no* supper!"

It wasn't necessary to send Chan in. A second later, the Chinese rushed in screaming, dived for the sink and dunked his smoking pigtail into some soapy suds. "Clazy boys!" he exclaimed unhappily. "Burn Chan in hair!"

Cassie admonished, "Keep away from them and those things won't happen." Inwardly, she was fuming. Some day, she was convinced, the Bar C hellions would go too far with their practical jokes.

Cassie Timmons inspected the oven. A mammoth beef roast was done to a turn. Under the impact of brutal range-sharpened appetites, it wouldn't survive even for hash. Weeks of chuckwagon grub put a keen edge on their hungers. It took some days to bring them back to human standards. "Men," Cassie reflected, "are at least half coyote. Probably good they eat like 'em . . . keeps 'em from behaving like coyotes in *other* ways."

She found herself in the pantry struggling with the tight cap of the brandy sauce. She scolded herself, "Now why do I do these things for Danno Boyle? He says to sweeten old Horace and here I go putting brandy in the gravy. Ought to make it sawdust, instead."

Some minutes later, when old Horace stood up to carve down the roast, it smelled like heaven itself. A whiff of the aroma and Cassie could see his frown lines relax. She'd never do it again for the undeserving whelps, Cassie was sure of that . . . sure until she caught Danno's warm smile across the width of the table. Then she wasn't so sure. She looked away, confused.

II

CASSIE'S cake was a huge success. The men obliterated it and complained like wounded steers when she told them there were no seconds. Right about then, the storm clouds that had been gathering at the head of the table erupted. Horace Sagamore, drying the corners of his greying mustache, cleared his throat.

"Now that you hyenas have a meal inside you," he began, "kindly pipe down while I proceed to the unpleasant business of dressin' down your no-good, misbehavin' hides."

That was the prelude. The symphony itself was full of discordants. Sagamore was at his oratorical best and temperamental worst, a dangerous combination. Cassie escaped by retreating to the kitchen. She and Chan winced over the dishes as they listened to the rumbling echoes of his strong voice.

"Heaven help us," Cassie breathed, "if I'd *put* sawdust in the gravy. Lord knows what he'd be mouthing if I hadn't softened him with vittles." She thought of Danno and suppressed a giggle.

In the dining hall, Sagamore thundered that costs of a new sidewalk was coming smack out of their pay. He didn't care a mite who in particular'd ridden on the wet walk, though he *was* certain a just, wrathful Lord was noting such goings-on with care. And when the hidebound miscreants got their pay on the morrow, the size of the deduction shouldn't surprise them. Sidewalks came high in the West.

Old Horace wound up with an all-inclusive, house-shaking admonition that only straightlaced behaviour would enable them to avoid the yawning, beckoning hell's fire that otherwise awaited one and all!

With those words, he clumped into the galley and rescued the gravy boat from immersion in suds. Yanking it from Chan's hands, he rubbed his thumb around the remains and transported his findings to his mouth. Between sloshings, he commented, "Mighty fine vittles girl!"

"Hmmph!" Cassie rejoined. "Could as well of served it raw. Your hands'd eat it live or dead!"

The old owner or the Bar C set down the gravy boat and protested, "Don't you pick on them lads. Strayed a leetle but not so far they won't know the right road when they see it!"

"You're a funny one, getting your back up when I show 'em a fingernail. Your little talk near took the hides off 'em," Cassie retorted.

Horace moved back to the kitchen door, stooping over the cake tin on the way to make sure it was really all gone. "Never mind, sassy Cassie," he growled. "I spoke up for the collective good of their maladjusted souls. Hurt me more'n it did them." And he was gone.

Cassie left Chan putting things away. She wandered out into the sunset. Looking across the gentle rises piercing the wind-swept flats to the last rim of sun just passing the horizon, she sighed at the scene's abundant beauty. Back East, she reflected, it was all ugliness crowding in. She didn't care if she never saw Boston again.

She thought back for a moment. What would they say, her family, her girlhood friends, if they could see her now? They'd be horrified! But not all of them. Doris Curtis, Mary Mahoney, her dearest chums, *they'd* be. . . .

A low voice penetrated her reflections. She whirled, started. It was Danno Boyle.

"I was just wondering," he murmured, "if that cake was really and truly gone."

"Danno Boyle," Cassie replied sharply, "what do you mean sneakin' up on a body, scarin' her half out of her wits?"

"I was makin' for the galley, ran into you here. What business you got out here, evening breeze fannin' your hair, makin' you look pretty enough to eat?"

Her hands came to her hips. "Where I come from, when a girl's pretty, it's not *eatin'* menfolks are minded to do," she informed him saucily. She didn't expect him to take his cue, but if a girl never tried, heavens, she might as well be in a wax museum!

Danno regarded her solemnly. Behind him, a banjo strummed up in the bunkhouse. The men had begun noisy preparations for a trip to town. It would be another hard night for the citizenry.

As Danno said nothing, Cassie pouted and added, "Besides, Danno, you know well enough I'm not a pretty one. You're the only one pays me that much mind and that's little enough."

Finally, Danno remarked, "It's grown dark." The sun had gone. "You'd best get yourself indoors. Some of the boys tend to be . . . irresponsible, first they come off the range."

Cassie held her ground. "I can look after myself, Danno. Don't you go imaginin' any of those rapscallions'd . . ."

Danno smiled. "Don't be too sure, Cassie."

"Oh, I'm a straight-lacy New Englander," she answered. "What they want's fancy ladies."

"Well, you be careful," he returned. "I know you don't take on with warpaint and such, and you dress gingham plain . . . but you've got style and color built in. A man notices those things, given time."

Cassie's heart leaped. Why, he sounded as if it mattered to him. He *was* unlike the rest. Those prairie wolves didnt see what wasn't fairly painted on their eyeballs.

"Maybe I will go in," she faltered. When he didn't reply, she started back. Reaching the galley door, she turned. "Oh, Danno," she called.

He'd been watching her go. "What, Cassie?"

"I've one piece of cake left over. It's hid. I was wonderin' who'd make me weaken and give it up."

With a delighted exclamation, the cowboy took out after her, as she disappeared with a flounce inside.

III

IF Horace Sagamore expected fines and admonishing to stem the wildness of his hands, he was mistaken. The boys staged a mock lynching their second night in, accusing the new Wells-Fargo man of a killing. In high dudgeon, they dragged him through the streets, persuading gullible onlookers to join the foray.

They roped the pleading man near a sturdy tree, flung the free end over a likely limb and ordered him to start praying. At that point, unable to contain their laughter, the Bar C boys revealed they'd been fooling.

When Sagamore heard about it, he was fit to be tied. He feared, as did Cassie, that the day would come when they'd go too far. He couldn't stop them by firing a few. And unless he was prepared to sacrifice the entire crew—replacing them would be difficult—he was at wits' end for a way to curb their shenanigans.

Danno told Cassie what he thought. It was his observation that, if there were enough women to go around in the West, there'd be lots fewer men marauding about making trouble. That set Cassie thinking and she decided she'd have a talk with old Horace.

She found him in his office, fuming over the mock lynching. He looked up, impatient, when she came in. "Well?" he demanded.

"Why?" Cassie demanded, "did you build bunkhouses for your men?"

"Now what kinduva fool question's that?" old Horace growled. His tone bespoke his temper's brevity.

"Answer me!"

"A fool can see why," he snorted. "Where else'd they sleep and stow their gear?"

Cassie rubbed her little hands together in the manner of a satisfied conspirator. "Good," she responded, "then you'll see sense in what I've in my mind."

Horace Sagamore adjusted his horn rims. "Look, girl!" he expostulated, "I'm busy. Cut short your chirpin' and leave me be!"

She bridled angrily but kept her temper. A soul'd catch more flies with honey! She cooed, "If you'd build bunkhouses to keep the men at work, why not build cabins to keep 'em civilized?"

He looked at her as if she'd gone mad. "What'n thunder's a'coursin' through that quagmire belfry of yours?"

"Just this, old Horace, and you've been a widower too long to see it right off!" she returned. "Build them cottages, get 'em womenfolks to keep 'em home nights . . . and there'll nevermore be mock lynchings and the devil himself knows what next!"

There was a pregnant pause, during which his mustache ends took a severe cut. Finally, he managed, "Cassie, you're addled. Be off with you. A cook y'are, a problem solver y'aren't!"

He leveled a finger at the door but she stayed put. "I'll get the girls," she promised desperately. "You have fourteen men, all told . . . I'll get thirteen girls."

"Are you deef as well as addled?" he demanded. "Well, you heard me just . . ." He broke off and snorted, "Fourteen men and it's *thirteen* women! Could it be you've one fixed for ropin' . . . and that against my wishes?"

Her eyes were saucers of innocence. "Horace Sagamore, I haven't disobeyed you. Though I reckon I'm entitled to, say, the leavings."

He got to his feet. "It'd never work. Haulin' logs to build cabins, gettin' them worthless rapscallions to do the work, selling some females on the crazy scheme! Back to the kitchen, wench. Be off!"

Vexed, she beat a strategic retreat. More argument, she knew, would serve only to strengthen his opposition. "I'll give the old buzzard time to mull it over. If his varmints stir up more trouble 'fore ridin' back to range, he'll think more kindly on it." Or so Cassie hoped.

Back in the kitchen, Cassie was mournful. It was a despairing business, being in love with distant Danno Boyle. For in love she was, she finally faced it straight. Short he was, lost inside himself a little, stand-offish in a nice way. But Cassie did love him and how a girl was to get a man who . . . It *was* exasperating.

At that, the Bar C boys behaved several nights. But it was too good to last. The break came when, unable to live with their pent-up good spirits any longer, they back-slid with a vengeance and vehemence that left the nearby community shaking for weeks. They staged a fake Indian raid, descending on town in the middle of the night in Indian garb, uttering blood-curdling shrieks all too familiar to the settlers.

After a wild ride through town, they isolated the outlying properties and passed the bulk of the night harassing the occupants with harmless gunfire. A few hours before dawn, however, disaster struck.

As they later figured it, Cliff Madden accidentally crossed somebody's line of fire changing positions. Either a stray shot from the house got him or he took a bullet from one of the Bar C boys themselves. He fell without a murmur and it wasn't before he'd lost considerable blood that they stumbled on him.

They rushed him back to Bar C. Without asking any questions, old Horace got his medical kit and skillfully removed the bullet. There wasn't time to wait for the doctor. Horace did his best. When he finished, there was nothing to do but await the doctor . . . and to see if Cliff had enough stamina to withstand his wound.

Cassie stayed at his side. Horace strode up and down the hall outside the room in the ranch house they'd brought Cliff to. As for the men, they fell into various aimless positions out around the front porch, waiting for the verdict that time would bring.

Madden developed raging fever, grew delirous. Cassie sponged him off, applied cold towels, comforted him in his moments of lucidity. But as time passed, it became evident Madden was sinking.

Finally, the doctor arrived. He got to

work but there was little hope. The wound was infecting badly. He cleaned it again. Cassie fought off a faint to assist him. Madden lapsed into unconsciousness just as the first streaks of daylight crept into the sky. Less than half an hour later, Cliff Madden was dead.

Cassie went down to the kitchen to have her cry. She was still at it when Danno quietly let himself in. When she saw him, she vainly attempted to wipe the tears away with her apron. Danno lent her a handkerchief.

"Oh, Danno, it's so terrible . . . so wasteful," she cried. And her words brought on a fresh torrent. Without prelude, she felt herself enfolded by his arms and suddenly her very tears were comfortingly warm against her cheeks. He soothed her with soft phrases she hardly heard. He dried her eyes.

"It's been bound to happen," he explained. "I've fretted how to head off something like this, but nothing would have prevented it. Recalling what they did last night, we have to be glad it was one of ours, not some poor settler jolted out of his sleep and deviled most to death."

Cassie nodded. She sniffed miserably. It was good to be in Danno's arms. "What's going to happen now?" she sobbed.

Danno Boyle shrugged. He stroked her head gently. "We'll put Madden under the ground, Cassie. Pretty soon, there'll be another to take his place. Though I guess this'll stop the deviltry . . . for a while."

"For a while?" Cassie echoed. "There's heartache enough to last us a lifetime!"

Danno shook his head. "No, Cassie, dear. Only for a while. Madden's death's bad . . . very bad . . . but it doesn't solve the problems, only makes more."

They heard Chan's pat-patting down the corridor and stepped apart. A bit flustered, Cassie managed, "Dear me, this isn't getting chow, is it?"

Danno smiled. He moved towards the door and murmured, "Won't much matter today if it's late." He added, "Keep up your courage, Cassie."

Later that day, a party from town came to see old Horace. They were bitter about the events of the night before. They demanded of the region's biggest rancher that something be done about it. The alternative was boycott, legal action, maybe worse, range war. One more incident and they wouldn't be responsible for reprisals.

Some time after they left, Horace Sagamore, after a good think, waved Cassie into his office. He looked whipped as he motioned her into a chair. When she was seated, he asked wearily, "Now, Cass, let's go through it together slow. Where'd they be got from, the thirteen lassies . . . except now it'll be twelve we're wantin'?"

The girl leaned eagerly to him and put a tiny paw on his big-boned fist. "Well, then, old Horace, since you ask, here's what I'd do. . . ."

IV

HAVE 'em out if they'll come, then!" Old Horace finally agreed. He'd pay their way, put 'em up in the main house. Cassie could clean up, scrub up, pretty up the place to her heart's content. But there'd be no advance wedding talk nor any building of cabins until the talk came from the men themselves . . . and from the girls if it came to be. He, Horace, he'd vow, was sorry for the female who'd take up with his two-legged whelps.

Cassie confided in Danno straight off. In a way, she reminded him, it'd been his idea. Danno wasn't convinced any bevy of proper Boston misses could be persuaded to make such a cupid's journey, but he reckoned it was worth a try.

It was no simply done task. Cassie had to have Danno's help with the letter. Of course, Danno was perfect for that. But there was the deciding of who to write. Some of the girls'd be married by now. Others would never consent.

She talked each of her old chums over with Danno. Of each, he'd have something to say. "Well, now, she might do, but on the other hand, don't you think . . .?" Or, "Come, Cassie, that one's a waste of breath."

In the end, they agreed on writing two, adventuresome, imaginative Doris Curtis

and beautiful, spirited Mary Mahoney, two of Cassie's closest friends in Boston days. Cassie'd explain the whole thing out carefully, then wait for their reaction.

As Danno had her put it, it was much like when the early colonists sent overseas for a shipload of prospective brides. Things worked out fine that time. They should again. It'd be up to Doris and Mary to pick out the others. Cassie could suggest some names, but she'd really lost touch. The girls in Boston could do it better. Some staid sober New England stock was wanted here to tame the western wildness out of old Horace's problem boys.

"I expect I'll die before I know," Cassie breathed, the day they sent off the letters. Weeks went by while they tried to push them out of their minds . . . weeks during which Danno and Cassie could see the measure of restlessness among the Bar C hands rising steadily. Once or twice, during that time, old Horace quietly asked if Cassie'd heard. She had to say she hadn't. But a letter finally did arrive!

It was from Doris Curtis. Mary Mahoney, she wrote, was expecting her second blessed event at this writing. But she, Doris, was free as the breeze that came through Boston, much of it from the same western plains that held dearest Cassie prisoner.

The gist of Doris's letter was that she was captivated with the idea. She'd sounded out several eligible friends and received mixed replies. She still had to hurdle her parents, but that, she considered, was a minor obstacle. If she succeeded in rounding up the required dozen girls, she'd write again and begin making arrangements for the trip.

"More weeks to wait!" Cassie exclaimed, as if the effort would be more than she could stand.

But more weeks she did wait, during which her excitement grew and grew.

(Please turn page)

SNARE OF THE SALTGRASS SIREN *(Continued from page 60)*

McQuinn began, "Look, I wish there was something—" The look on Glenn's face stopped him. He shrugged. "Guess I been too ornery for my own good. It took a dressing down from my gal to fetch me to town for the showdown. But ain't you going to stay till—"

Glenn was thinking of the deputy's badge in his shirt pocket. It was a part of Taters he would keep always. "I never liked funerals," he told the silent crowd. "Especially of folks I liked. I'm heading back to Texas. With Taters gone, there's nothing to hold me here."

He saw the hurt expression on Charlie's face when he said it. "Thanks for the help," he told her, and touched the sorrel's flanks.

He left Roswell and rode eastward at a steady jog, unable to clear his mind of the countless little things that can haunt a man. *They had been hunting me all day when I found your camp . . . some fried taters and cornbread would sure fix me up where I'm all tore down . . . I've never really belonged to him, Glenn, not in my heart . . . how can I ever make you understand. . . .*

A mile from town he heard a horse coming up fast behind him. He looked at Charlie in a wide, searching way when her pinto came up alongside and slowed to a jog.

"Do you think you could end it like that?" the girl said in a choked voice. "I'm sorry for yesterday, Glenn. I knew you could never do a thing like that. I really didn't mean it that way. Can't I ride with you?"

Glenn weighed it, conscious again of that deep hunger for her. "I lost my head, I guess," he said contritely. "But what of your pa? Does he want this?"

"He wants whatever I want, whatever will make me happy, even if he loses me. He said to tell you that, Glenn."

They stopped the horses and stared at each other. Charlie's slow smile melted the last of Glenn's doubt. "We can look up a preacher at the next town," he said softly, and leaned toward her.

Danno cautioned her against getting her hopes too high. Doris's task was complex . . . she might fail. "Indeed, Cassie, she's quite enough likely to fail!"

And so the time went . . . Cassie alternating between hope and despair. But Doris's second letter arrived at last! Cassie was shaking like a leaf with suspense, ripping it open and reading it.

"Cassie darling . . . *I've done it!*" Cassie darling almost fainted for joy. She read on. "This business has caused a terrible fuss among some of our finest families, but a combination of tact and tears has won the day! We are twelve young adventuresses, good and true, and we even have a committee at work drawing up rules to govern the marriage sweepstakes. Naturally, the men in question will fall like flies before us. We're ready to set out at a moment's notice, so have your old Horace send the money and we are yours."

There was more, details about the trip. The girls had done everything. They knew the route, they knew to the penny the cost. When Cassie brought her letter to old Horace for his blessing in the form of cash, her little eyes were shining as never before.

So began a cross-country transaction, the stakes thirteen males, twelve all unsuspecting. The men were rather simply informed that a number of Cassie's friends, having nothing better to do with their parents' money, were coming West for a visit with their dear little girlhood friend. Just by coincidence, the time of the visit would be when next the Bar C boys came in off the sprawling rangelands.

In his own quiet way, Danno Boyle broke the news to the men. His subsequent report to Cassie of their reaction to the news was interesting. For the most part, Danno told her her, they took the announcement with stalwart aplomb. You'd think he told them there'd be breakfast steak on the morrow, to judge by their initial reactions.

"But when evenin' came on, it was mighty peculiar the way none of them hyenas felt like a trip in town," Danno grinned. "No, they kind of moped around

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the bunkhouse, that faraway look in their eyes gettin' far-away'er every passin' second."

One day followed another and the hands just naturally began clinging to Bar C like it was their very own homestead. Covertly at first, then more brazenly, the men passed their free time in such useless ways as mending, washing, pressing and stowing their best outfits for after next roundup, practicing mustache and sideburn trimming, and the like. The males of Bar C, it developed, though strangely uncommunicative on the subject of the expected arrival of a dozen young ladies, were getting strangely neat in their habits all of a sudden.

Cassie listened to Danno's frequent observations on their conduct and her heart glowed. Once she tempted fate and teasingly asked him, "And you, Danno? Are *you* fancyin' up and prettifyin', too? Will you be lookin' for one to cotton to you, pray?"

He replied, "As to that, Cassie, you know that I'm the runt of the litter. I expect I'll take me whatever's left over amongst 'em."

Cassie breathed, "Oh, Danno, you're wrong. The best of them'll take to you." And she thought inwardly, "The smartest of men's such fools. If only he knew. . . ."

The time finally came when the menfolks rode off. Another year's beef had fattened on the range and was ready to come in on the first leg of the long trip to market. Cassie was unhappy to see Danno go, but she had a million things to do, preparations filling long lists, hastily jotted as they occurred to her. There was the rooming situation, requiring a monumental overhauling of the ranch house. There was prettifying and curtaining and provisioning and all manner of things to do . . . things only Cassie could do, with limited aid from Chan.

If Cassie missed Danno, at least the time passed swiftly. Day after day disappeared, between trips into town, frantic searchings for scarce items, the weighty business of ordering through Wells-Fargo, and the never-ending chores of preparing the household for the arrival of twelve young ladies.

Old Horace rode in off the range frequently as possible, attempting to oversee what was costing him a year's profits. In the end, he just surrendered the work, lock, stock and barrel to the girl with the endless store of energy. For his part, old Horace promised to see that roundup was completed on time for the arrival of the girls. At that, he reported no dawdling on the range. The men themselves were working as they never had before. It was apparent they, too, were anxious to be on hand for the arrival of Cassie's twelve casual visitors.

V

CASSIE was in her room, peering into the all too tarnished silver surface of her mirror. The house was a beehive of activity. Twelve belles were busy making themselves look their best. Out in the bunkhouses, there was just as much activity. The males, back from roundup that very day, were expending fabulous amounts of energy in the greatest scrubbing up, soaping up, shining up operation the West had ever witnessed.

Gone now were the too-idle pretenses of aplomb that had nursed them through the period of waiting. Only Danno's hand seemed to be steady as dinner approached, the time of the meeting. As a result, Danno, by actual count, adjusted no less than twelve string ties besides his own. He restrained any humorous remarks he might have felt coming to his tongue and helped as best he could turn out a painfully-scrubbed, uncomfortably well-tailored lot of cowboys.

Cassie'd had everything prepared hours early. That Doris Curtis had chosen well, Cassie was completely satisfied. The girls were a grand lot. Cassie felt downright proud for Boston, for some reason she'd never fathom, not even with Danno's help. And she felt proud for herself, for hadn't she started the whole thing.

Suddenly, a tear came to her eyes. She lost the grand feeling and realized she was frightened. The girls had organized rules for themselves but Cassie stood at the fringe. It went without saying there'd be a man left over for her . . . but sup-

pose it wasn't Danno? She'd sneak out into the night and never stop walking if that happened.

With sudden resolution, she reached into the drawer of her dressing table. She brought forth several unmentionable items and uncapped them. Consulting her face dismally, she muttered, "Why, oh, why haven't I practiced all these weeks? I'll do it all wrong, I know!"

Slowly, with growing determination, she transferred timid amounts of the colored matter from the jars to parts of her face. She smeared and blended and rubbed it off many times until, finally, she acknowledged, "I'll look like a squaw on the warpath but it's the best I can do!"

She got to her feet, surveyed herself in the mirror and said, "It's fighting lions without a gun, Cassie . . . but Danno's worth the struggle. Down you go!"

And down she went. It had been Horace Sagamore's plan that all should meet at the supper table, but the girls drifted down to Cassie's decorated parlor early and so, heaven help 'em, did the ardent swains. By the time Cassie descended, the worst awkward moments had passed. In fact, animated conversations had sprung up on all sides. Girls Cassie'd known only the shortest time were recalling to the boys how they'd known Cass' since she was knee-high to a grasshopper and the cowboys were allowing that, gosh'a'mighty, Cassie hadn't grown much since!

Only Danno was by himself, casually glancing at a periodical. Old Horace himself seemed to be everywhere at once. You'd think, to see him carry on, that he was out to win one of the lassies himself.

Cassie caught Danno's eye, saw him do a double take at her appearance and quickly disappeared down the passage to the kitchen, her heart doing a regular drum chorus in double time. Once safe in the confines of the kitchen, she was confronted by Chan, who eyed her unbelievingly.

"Cassie have fever?" he demanded.

She fixed him with a glare from the oven. "Nothing of the sort. I feel fine!"

"Color very high," he countered, doubtfully. "Cassie sure feel good?"

"Never better, varmint! Here help me with this roast!" Together, they struggled it to a sideboard. Cassie put Chan to work slicing it. She'd decided to serve it that way. She fussed about the food several moments before becoming aware that she was being watched.

It was Danno, handkerchief in hand. She straightened up in surprise, not a little pleased that he'd seen the difference and followed her in. A little color in the cheeks, months ago, might have. . . .

"Dear Cassie," he said, gently enough, "whatever possessed you to go on the warpath, tonight of all nights?"

Her smile vanished. She brought her

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hands to her hips. "Why, Danno Boyle, whatever are you . . ."

He came closer and inspected her unbelievingly. "By heaven, you've really done yourself up to a turn, Cassie," he told her. "And whatever for, may I ask?"

She had a sob in her throat. The tears were poised. She couldn't believe her ears. Still, there was something in his tone that kept her guessing. Then he came out with it.

"Is it a better man than me you're trying to catch, after all, Cassie?" he demanded. "Remember, girl, I saw you first. And now you're trickin' yourself out like the rest of them, makin' a spectacle of yourself by joinin' that marital sweepstakes!"

"Spectacle, is it?" she faltered. The tears were in evidence now. "Maybe so, Danno Boyle, but if I am a spectacle, it's only for fear I'll be tawdry and one of the others'll catch your eye!" With that, she burst into tears for fair.

He swept her into his arms with a speediness that made poor Chan come close to slicing his own hand into the roast. And he didn't know whether to laugh or cry himself, or what use to give the handkerchief he'd been holding.

"Oh, now, girl," he murmured, "I'd intended wiping off that ruck with the kerchief . . . we'll use it to dry those eyes, instead. If it's me you colored up your face for, you can strut about like a turkey-hen with all your colors and I won't pay that much mind. But if 'twas for some other buck, then heaven help me if I wouldn't wipe it off and the skin with it!"

"Heaven help *me*," Cassie sighed, "I'm in love with a brute!"

They kissed. And the tears still poured down both Cassie's cheeks, fairly ruining the makeup she'd worked so hard to apply. In the end, Danno had to help her wipe it all off. When it was done, they acknowledged Cassie wasn't really the type.

"But what does it matter now?" she demanded. "I've got my man and I must say it was the paint sent you flying in after me, even if it was with evil in your wicked heart!"

They kissed again on that. It was Chan, coughing, that reminded them of a meal still to be served. "Heaven," Cassie exclaimed, "pleasant as this going-on is, Danno, it's not stilling the appetites out there!"

"Food won't do that, girl," he told her. "But you're welcome to try. And I might add, I'm glad we're clear now who is whose between us, Cassie . . . before the wholesale lovemaking commences with all the others."

"Go along with you and tell 'em to get set down at the table," she countered. "Things're all ready."

As he went, she threw after him, "It's on your plate I'll expect to see *your* eyes, boy, when I'm serving . . . and not on those pretty wenches, hear?"

"My solemn oath," he replied and was gone.

A minute or two later, she walked in and found not a soul seated yet at the table. She brought hands to hips and favored Danno with a glare. "Chow," she announced, "is served!" But in the din of conversation, grown more animated by leaps and bounds, her words went unheard.

"Does anybody care to eat?" she asked, raising her voice.

"Give it up," Danno suggested, moving to her side. "And what's amiss with cold beef when they finally feel the need for nourishment?"

Cassie looked around the room with satisfaction. She could see this room in a year . . . in several months, perhaps. At least one would be knitting by then, and at least one buckaroo holding twine in his big gawk's hands. One thing was sure, the carousing and night riding of the Bar C boys was at an end. It was as plain as the blushes on the girls' faces. And nothing could be plainer than that!

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